



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Chinese villagers seek reparations for effects of Dahe Dam, 1980-1990

April

1980

to: April

1990

Country: China

Location City/State/Province: *Shanyang Township*

Goals:

To receive adequate compensation for land lost due to the dam, gain collective ownership of the calcium-carbide factory built to restore the area economically, and bring corrupt local officials to justice.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 015. Group lobbying
- 162. Sit-in
- 168. Nonviolent raids

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 161. Nonviolent harassment
- 162. Sit-in
- 168. Nonviolent raids
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Methods in 4th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 015. Group lobbying
- 145. General administrative noncooperation
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 5th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 032. Taunting officials
- 162. Sit-in
- 168. Nonviolent raids

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 162. Sit-in
- 168. Nonviolent raids

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Farmers whose land had been destroyed by the Dahe Dam

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Xu Shaorong, Liang Yongde, and Wang Xueping were among the organizers. Most of the leaders had a source of income aside from farming, which allowed them the stability to devote themselves to organizing.

Partners:

Not Known

External allies:

The Shanyang District government supported the campaigners demands by targeting the dam and its workers at some points

Involvement of social elites:

One characteristic of this campaign was continuous friction among different levels of government. Individual government officials would periodically champion the cause of the frustrated villagers, but none was willing to risk a career for the cause. One township-level official, Pu Shaosong, gave protesters the idea of seizing food from the hydroelectric station cafeteria.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Liang Yongde
- Xu Shaorong

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Shanyang District government
- Shanyang District government (exit)

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Joining order of other groups not known

Segment Length: *Approximately 1 year 8 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Local and regional government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

When a team of government officials came to harass Xu Shaorong at his home, protesters surrounded them and spit, threw dirt, and threatened them with hammers and screwdrivers. Also, following the final occupation of the dam in 1990, protesters kicked, punched, and dragged an official and threatened to throw him in the river.

Repressive Violence:

Not Known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

2 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

A grain subsidy was created in response to the repeated demands for aid, but it did not include the entire afflicted area. Ownership of the factory became a nonissue once villagers looted it of all equipment. It did not provide the intended economic boost. No governmental officials were cited for corruption.

No semblance of organization survived after the government put its foot down in 1990.

The protesters grew significantly in number over the course of their campaign. In a sense, this was their undoing, because the government lost the ability to mollify a small group of discontents with mild concessions.

In July 1975, the Dahe Dam on the Dahe River in Shanyang Township, southern China, was completed. The environmental toll of the project accumulated within months. Upstream of the dam, rising waters swamped homes and farmland, while downstream, water coming from the spillways scoured away riverbank, causing widespread erosion and loss of fertile land. The government anticipated a certain amount of upstream flooding, and accordingly compensated the affected population and relocated them when necessary. In the haste to complete the project, however, the engineers had neglected to consider the inevitable downstream erosion. Furthermore, the upstream flooding was more widespread than anticipated, increasing the number of affected villagers without compensation. When distraught farmers sought compensation for lost land at the township, district, county and prefecture levels, they were repeatedly rebuffed. From time to time, monetary aid was pledged but never delivered. Instead, the government decided to build a chemical calcium-carbide factory in Shanyang to provide jobs and economic development. Locals did not truly benefit from the investment in the factory, nor was it adequately communicated to locals that the factory represented the payment for their land. A major flood in 1979 further increased the suffering of those displaced by the dam.

By 1980, villagers had begun to realize that their goals would not be met through institutional channels. This realization crystallized one day in April, when a hungry crowd of people descended on the office of Pu Shaosong, the head of Shanyang Township, angrily demanding money. Exasperated, Pu said, "You should go higher up if you want money. You should go to the hydropower station if you want food". The inspired crowd moved to the dam's cafeteria, where they ate all the food prepared for the workers. They promised to return every day until their demands for adequate compensation were met. An official from the prefecture government soon arrived in Shanyang and provided immediate aid to the villagers. The mollified protesters stopped occupying the dam cafeteria. When Pu Shaosong witnessed this, he alerted other affected people who were not present, so they could also receive their funds.

The prefecture government convened a meeting later in 1980 to establish a new, long-term compensation plan. The protesters were initially pleased, but, as time passed, it became clear that the funds had been misappropriated by various officials, leaving nothing but the dysfunctional chemical calcium-carbide factory for those affected. The campaign fell into disarray for several years. Hungry farmers chose to beg or borrow from relatives rather than navigate the maze of bureaucracy.

In 1983, a local schoolteacher named Xu Shaorong entered the controversy. Thanks to his education and knowledge of governmental policies, he acquired a leadership role. In response to the flooding of his land, he personally reclaimed a small parcel of land owned by the village government, an example that was followed by many others. He also created problems for governmental officials by writing strongly worded letters encouraging investigation into the missing funds. Another man named Liang Yongde played a similar role.

Conflict among levels of government spread as the affected villagers continued to agitate. Local officials felt unfairly blamed for the effects of the dam, because they had not proposed it, nor did they receive its profits. To show its displeasure, Shanyang District expelled all children of dam workers from Shanyang High School, and cut off a number of other services to the dam and its employees.

A devastating flood in the summer of 1984 greatly increased the misery for many. Among the affected areas were the villages of Xinhua and Bolin, which, although harmed by the dam, were far downstream of the area eligible for compensation. Villagers from Xinhua and Bolin travelled upstream to the dam, where they harassed workers, ate food from the cafeteria, and generally caused havoc for two weeks. In response, these two villages were awarded a lump sum payment.

Delegates from the prefecture government arrived in April 1985, promising to restore the currently nonoperational calcium-carbide factory. They made the factory the cornerstone of their economic plan, but refused to comply with the locals' demands

that the factory accounts undergo an unbiased audit. After a forty-day impasse, the delegation left Shanyang and resolved to silence the troublemakers, beginning with Xu Shaorong. When Xu refused to be transferred to a far-away school, the government suspended him without pay. Then they began to threaten and harass him, ostensibly for his failure to abide by the government's one-child policy. Even when the government seized and forcibly sterilized Xu's wife, Xu continued to write letters and file appeals on behalf of his fellow citizens. When a family-planning team arrived at Xu's house in November 1985 for an inspection, 300 citizens from nearby villages enclosed the men and yelled at them to leave Xu and his family alone. Some of the 300 carried hammers and screwdrivers, and others spit at the inspectors or threw clods of dirt. After several hours, Xu asked the crowd to disperse, but only after the inspectors had vowed to leave Xu alone.

Following this event, the prefecture government resolved to better address the problem of corruption, and established a work team in Shanyang with representatives from the four levels of government: prefecture, county, district and township. Another incident soon occurred in which citizens from Mingyue, another village that had been excluded from the area to be compensated, blocked the car of work team commissioner Dong Guoguang and personally implored him to consider their plight. Dong elected not to make any promises. Soon afterward, his team released a new set of three principles, which marked a real departure from the government's previous approach: "(1) Affected people should receive compensation directly, (2) Resettlement funds should not be disbursed in one lump sum, but little by little in a steady flow, and (3) The various affected groups should be treated differently, and not as one undifferentiated mass". The means of compensation was to be a grain allowance, but the exact amount was not set.

When the matter had not been settled by spring 1986, a group of ten locals led by Wang Xueping traveled to Beijing and, after meeting many dead ends, presented a petition seeking an "honest judge" in the national government. The petitioners, who still had much faith in the national government, believed this success would be their savior. They were very disappointed, then, when the prefecture announced that the grain allowance would be much smaller than expected, and would exclude many affected communities. The prefecture also moved to transfer ownership of the calcium-carbide factory to the managers of the Dahe Dam.

The transference of factory ownership sparked a new phase of the campaign. Villagers believed that, because the factory was originally built to ameliorate their financial troubles, they should own it. This argument found a receptive ear in one of the prefecture officials, who signed a decree authorizing transference of ownership to a collective of villagers. Other levels of government disagreed, however, and the factory remained in limbo. In the midst of this controversy, a memo was issued which definitively revealed the factory accounts to be severely out of balance. This was the most concrete evidence to date of corruption, and the organizers of the campaign increased their calls for the guilty officials to be brought to justice. To escalate the campaign, Xu Shaorong and Wang Xueping arranged another occupation of the hydroelectric station on August 1-3, 1987. Before the action, the two leaders laid ground rules for the hundreds of followers—they would not do physical harm to any person or interfere with electrical generation in the dam. The occupiers ate food from the cafeteria as they repeatedly asked the dam managers and government officials where the missing funds had gone.

This action caused the government to change its stance, but not in the desired way. Officials became convinced that they had erred by previously granting small concessions in response to demonstrations—this empowered the protesters and led them to think that disobedience was productive. They resolved not to bend the rules any longer, follow through with the transfer of the calcium-carbide factory to the Dahe station, and "educate [the protesters] about the law and help them gain an understanding of where they went wrong". An arrest warrant was issued for the campaign leaders, but the two sides reached an agreement whereby their freedom was guaranteed if they did not organize any further demonstrations.

In the following months, organizers dropped their demands that officials be investigated for corruption, and instead focused on obtaining collective ownership of the factory. As negotiations on this topic dragged on, however, villagers began to steal more and more equipment from the currently abandoned factory, until it was devoid of all value. Thus, ownership ceased to be of importance, and both sides dropped the matter altogether.

The next series of actions were organized not by the experienced organizers, who represented villages upstream of the dam, but by the inhabitants of Baiyang 16, located directly below the dam. Having received conflicting promises and repeated stalling on

the issue of compensation for land scoured away by erosion, villagers decided to follow the model of the previous cafeteria raids. They occupied the dam cafeteria on March 19-22, 1990, and helped themselves to full meals. To their disappointment, they were largely ignored by the government, which had decided not to respond to demonstrations. Another occupation on April 14-16 ended when dam staffers threatened protesters with heavy wooden sticks to reclaim the station. On their way out of the station, protesters disconnected several pieces of machinery within the dam, stopping the generation of electricity. They also violently assaulted an official and threatened to throw him in the river.

At this point, with the recent Tiananmen Square protests symbolizing the danger of political dissent, government officials were in no mood to grant any more demands to the protesters in Shanyang. They systematically dismissed the demands of Baiyang 16, and soon arrested several leaders to serve as scapegoats for the 10-year campaign. In light of these developments, organizers realized that further protests would only bring more trouble, rather than government concessions. The baseline grain allowances continued, but many affected people remained outside their reach. The Dahe Dam ceased operating in 2003 when the Three Gorges Dam reservoir reached its gates. Many villagers who spent years protesting the effects of the Dahe Dam were again uprooted and resettled as a result of the Three Gorges project.

Research Notes

Influences:

This campaign influenced resistance against the Three Gorges dam project in the same region (2).

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

Edited by Max Rennebohm (15/06/2011)

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

William Lawrence, 24/09/2010

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