

The Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project: A Product of Extreme Nationalism

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To maintain China's global leadership in hydropower engineering, the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project is tasked with the role of "Super Successor" to the Three Gorges Dam.

The Chinese have a deep obsession with being number one in the world. The Three Gorges Project was designed to surpass the Itaipu Dam in both installed capacity and annual power generation, a victory that Jiang Zemin could hardly wait to announce back in 1997.

But bad news has arrived: the Grand Inga Dam in the Democratic Republic of Congo is poised to overtake the Three Gorges Project, claiming the crown for world's largest dam. To counter this, the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project must be built at an even larger scale, ensuring that China retains its position as the global leader in hydropower engineering.



The Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon in Tibet. Image source: Internet.

The Three Gorges Project was born out of extreme nationalism, and so too is the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project.

1. What Is the Real Purpose of Constructing the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project?

On December 25, 2024, Xinhua News Agency reported that the Chinese government had recently approved the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project.¹ But what is the real purpose behind building this massive hydropower station?

Is it to meet Tibet's electricity demand?

¹ *The Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project Has Been Approved*, December 25, 2024, Xinhua News Agency, <http://www.news.cn/politics/20241225/b61f14cad5c046a0a209bf36fa99d69b/c.html>

Clearly not. Since 2015, Tibet has been exporting electricity to other regions. On December 18, 2024, Xinhua reported that Tibet had successfully completed its first interregional green power transaction with Beijing for 2025, with a pre-sold electricity volume of 15 million kilowatt-hours. This milestone marked Tibet's first-ever large-scale green power export.²

Is it to meet China's national electricity needs?

Again, the answer is no. As early as 2016—when China's GDP was still performing relatively well—experts pointed out that the country was already facing a severe electricity surplus. Yet, driven by profit, more coal power plants continued to be built.³ By 2024, with sluggish economic growth, the problem of electricity overcapacity has only worsened. The abandonment of wind, hydropower, and solar energy has become the norm. The first to be sacrificed were solar power systems installed by farmers for poverty alleviation, which were forcibly shut down, leaving them in despair.

Is it to accelerate the development of renewable energy?

Absolutely not. Small hydropower is internationally recognized as a clean, renewable energy source. In 2016, China had 47,529 small hydropower stations at its peak. By 2021, the number had dropped to around 42,400,⁴ a net decrease of 5,129. Taking into account newly built projects, over 10,000 small hydropower stations were dismantled, with fewer new projects initiated each year. As of the end

² *Tibet's Green Electricity Delivered to Beijing for the First Time*, December 18, 2024, Source: State Grid Tibet Electric Power Co., Ltd., published on Xinhua Tibet Channel, <http://tibet.news.cn/20241218/53b7fb53fa2947c8a48986c8f738cf2d/c.html>

³ *China Faces Severe Power Surplus—New Coal Power Plants May Not Be Needed for the Next 10 Years!*, August 8, 2016, Source: Huaxia Energy Network, <https://www.yd380v.com/article-612.html>
Nuclear and Wind Power Halted Due to Power Surplus, Yet More Coal Power Plants Were Built for Profit, Quandi Exhibition Network, <https://www.china-epower.com/news2.asp?id=2764>

⁴ *Weber Consulting: Latest! 2023 China Small Hydropower Industry Special Report and In-Depth Analysis*, http://www.weibozixun.com/page15?article_id=3701&pagenum=all

of 2022, 4,042 small hydropower stations had been demolished in the Yangtze River Basin alone.

So, what is the real purpose of constructing the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project?

The answer is simple: to maintain China's status as the world leader in hydropower engineering.

2. Building the World's Largest Hydropower Project at Any Cost

On June 3, 2006, the Chinese Communist Party's official website published an article from *People's Daily* titled, "*The Three Gorges Project Sets Over 100 World Records, the Most Innovative Engineering Project.*" The article declared that the Three Gorges Hydropower Project, hailed as the "world's number one hydropower project," was unparalleled in scale and technical complexity, making it the greatest of its kind. It boasted that the project had set over 100 world records, calling it "*the most innovative engineering project.*"

Many Chinese people felt immense pride in these so-called world records. However, the reality is that many of these records are meaningless, and some are even negative—such as the highest number of displaced residents, the staggering total cost of the project, and the immense financial burden placed on ordinary citizens through the Three Gorges Fund. [Ed. After the World Bank and U.S. Export-Import Bank refused to finance the Three Gorges Dam, a fund was created without hearing or approval from the National People's Congress to help pay for the project. Citizens were forced to contribute to the Three Gorges Fund through their electricity rates.]

"To call the Three Gorges Project "*the most innovative engineering project*" is a complete misconception. Large and mega-scale dam projects have long been a declining industry—a sunset technology, so to speak. A brief look at history makes this clear.

In 1928, the U.S. Congress approved the construction of the Hoover Dam, which stood 221.4 meters tall—an unprecedented engineering feat in concrete dam construction at the time. Completed two years ahead of schedule in 1936, the Hoover Dam became the world's largest concrete structure and the world's most

powerful hydropower station. Its completion ushered in a global dam-building boom, known as "*the era of dams*," which lasted through the 1960s and 1970s.

However, the Aswan High Dam in Egypt—along with the severe social, economic, and environmental problems it caused—marked a turning point. British scholars Edward Goldsmith and Nicholas Hildyard published the three-volume *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams* in 1984, 1986, and 1992.⁵ This was the first comprehensive study to analyze the technical, economic, and social impacts of large dams, evaluating both their functions and their devastating consequences. Afterward, developed nations in the West gradually abandoned large-scale dam construction and instead entered "*the era of dam removal*."

In 1989, renowned Chinese ecologist Hou Xueyu urged for the translation of *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams* into Chinese⁶ so that the Chinese public could better understand global scientific and technological advancements. Unfortunately, China selectively introduces foreign technological achievements—choosing only those deemed "*useful to China*" while rejecting anything unpalatable to the Communist leadership. To this day, the book has never been translated into Chinese. As a result, *People's Daily* continues to portray both large and mega-dams as "*innovative projects*." But shouldn't we ask ourselves: *Why have developed nations willingly abandoned this so-called "innovation" on their own initiative?*

On November 8, 1997, during the "Yangtze River Three Gorges Project Main River Closure Ceremony," Jiang Zemin proudly proclaimed: "Today, we are building the world's largest and most comprehensive hydropower project on the

⁵ E. Goldsmith & N. Hildyard: *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams*, Wadebridge Ecological Centre, England, 1984, 1986, 1992

⁶ *The Endless Environmental Destruction Caused by the Three Gorges Project*, Hou Xueyu's interview with Zhu Jianhong, included in: Dai Qing (ed.), *Yangtze, Yangtze*, Guizhou People's Publishing House, 1989, Beijing; also included in: Li Nanyang (ed.), *Three Gorges, Ah!*, Xiliu Publishing House, 2020, U.S.

Yangtze River.”⁷ By 2006, *People’s Daily* was celebrating the fact that the Three Gorges Project had supposedly “set over 100 world records.”

3. The Three Gorges Project: Surpassing the Itaipu Dam at Any Cost to Claim the Crown Jewel of Global Hydropower

The Three Gorges Project won the title of the world’s largest hydropower project in terms of installed capacity and annual electricity generation by surpassing the Itaipu Dam. To achieve this goal, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) spared no expense—disregarding the immense social, economic, and environmental costs—all under the guise of demonstrating the supposed superiority of socialism’s ability to “concentrate resources to accomplish great feats.”

The Itaipu Hydroelectric Project is located on the border between Brazil and Paraguay.⁸ Initial planning began in the 1960s, and construction officially started in October 1975. The original design called for 18 turbines, each with a capacity of 700 megawatts (MW), totaling 12,600 MW, with an annual electricity output of 75 billion kilowatt-hours (kWh). The first turbine began generating electricity in 1984, and by May 1991, all 18 turbines were operational, marking the project’s completion. In 2006 and 2007, one additional 700 MW turbine was installed for each year, bringing the total to 20 turbines and a total installed capacity of 14,000 MW.⁹ In 2016, Itaipu set its highest annual electricity output record at 103.1 billion kWh.

In 1956, Lin Yishan, a key figure in the Yangtze River Water Resources Commission, proposed a Three Gorges Dam design with a normal reservoir water level of 235 meters, an installed capacity of 23,000 MW, and an annual electricity output of 150 billion kWh. By 1958, the plan was revised to a dam height of 210

⁷ Jiang Zemin: *Building the Three Gorges Project into a World-Class Project*, November 8, 1997, published on China Reform Information Database, <http://www.reformdata.org/1997/1108/5722.shtml>

⁸ For details on the Itaipu Dam Project, refer to *Wikipedia*, *Baidu Baike*, and: Zhao Chunhou, Zhu Zhenhong, Zhou Duanzhuang (eds.), *World Rivers and Dams*, pp. 134-141, China Water & Power Press, Beijing, 2000

⁹ Zhao Chunhou, Zhu Zhenhong, Zhou Duanzhuang (eds.), *World Rivers and Dams*, pp. 134-141, China Water & Power Press, Beijing, 2000

meters, an installed capacity of 13,400 MW, and an annual electricity output exceeding 100 billion kWh.¹⁰

In 1969, China's Ministry of Water Resources, the Wuhan Military Region, and the Hubei Provincial Revolutionary Committee jointly proposed the construction of the Three Gorges Project to Mao Zedong, using the 1958 design but adjusting the reservoir water level to 200 meters. If built, it would have been the world's largest hydropower project in terms of installed capacity and annual output (at that time, the Itaipu Dam had not yet been conceived). However, Mao rejected the proposal, citing national security concerns during wartime. Despite this, he approved the construction of the Gezhouba Dam—the first major dam on the Yangtze River—though its installed capacity was only 2,715 MW, far from making China the global leader.

After Mao's death, Hua Guofeng succeeded him and supported the construction of the Three Gorges Project. The Ministry of Water Resources continued to propose the 200-meter design, which Hubei Province strongly backed. However, Sichuan Province, located upstream of the dam site, firmly opposed the project, arguing that the scale of relocation required would be devastating for its population. To mitigate opposition, the Ministry of Water Resources proposed a low dam plan with a reservoir water level of 150 meters, reducing the number of displaced residents to 360,000. A backup plan was also introduced with an even lower water level of 128 meters.¹¹

In 1980, after Deng Xiaoping visited the Three Gorges region, he expressed support for the low dam plan (150 meters). This plan featured an installed capacity of 13,000 MW, just enough to surpass the Itaipu Dam's 12,600 MW, securing China's world leadership in hydropower capacity. However, its annual electricity output was still lower than that of Itaipu. In 1984, the State Council gave its

¹⁰ Wu Suhua: *[Historical Insights] A Model of Democratic Decision-Making: The Three Major Debates on the Three Gorges Project*, December 15, 2021, Source: *China Power Enterprise Management*, published on *Polaris Hydropower Network*, <https://m.bjx.com.cn/mnews/20211215/1193770.shtml>

¹¹ Wei Tingcheng (oral account), Liu Ronggang (compiled): *Decision-Making on the Three Gorges Project (Part II)*, *Centennial Tide Journal*, 2012, Issue 4, <http://hprc.org.cn/gsyj/jjs/hyyxs/201208/P020180412597704896307.pdf>

preliminary approval for the low dam plan and scheduled construction to begin in 1986.

However, this decision faced strong opposition from numerous members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), who argued that it violated principles of scientific and democratic decision-making. Even supporters of the Three Gorges Project, including Li Peng and Xiao Yang, opposed the low dam plan and pushed instead for increasing the normal reservoir water level to 180 meters, with the ultimate goal of securing the title of the world's largest hydropower project.

In his *Three Gorges Diary*, Li Peng recounted that on January 19, 1985; after hearing his report on the Three Gorges Project, Deng Xiaoping abandoned his support for the low-dam plan and instead backed Li Peng's proposed medium-dam plan (180 meters). According to Li Peng, this plan would increase installed capacity from 13,000 MW (as per the low-dam plan) to 20,000 MW, an increase of 7,000 MW. Likewise, annual electricity generation would rise from 65 billion kWh to 100 billion kWh.¹² This upgrade meant the Three Gorges Project would not only boast the world's largest installed capacity but would also surpass the Itaipu Dam's annual electricity generation, securing another world record.

After the feasibility study began in 1986, the final design proposal raised the reservoir's normal water level to 175 meters, with a total installed capacity of 17,680 MW (26 turbines, each with 680 MW) and an average annual electricity output of 84 billion kWh. Although this 175-meter plan fell short of the 180-meter version in both installed capacity and electricity generation, it still surpassed Itaipu at the time and was expected to claim both world records. In April 1992, the National People's Congress officially approved the construction of the Three Gorges Project.

In 1994, the planned turbine capacity was increased to 700 MW per unit, bringing the total installed capacity to 18,200 MW, while the projected average annual

¹² Li Peng: *Drawing the Grand Blueprint—Li Peng's Three Gorges Diary*, China Three Gorges Press, 2003, Beijing

electricity generation remained at 84 billion kWh. The first turbine began operation in 2003, with the project scheduled for completion in 2009.

In September 2008, as the Three Gorges Project neared completion, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) approved the construction of the Three Gorges Underground Power Station and the Auxiliary Power Station.¹³

- The Three Gorges Underground Power Station was designed to house six additional 700 MW turbines, bringing the total installed capacity to 4,200 MW, with a projected annual electricity output of 3.511 billion kWh. The total investment was estimated at 7.375 billion yuan (based on 2007 prices).
- The Auxiliary Power Station consisted of two 50 MW turbines, with an expected annual generation of 730 million kWh, requiring a total investment of 370.64 million yuan (based on 2006 prices).

This expansion increased the total installed capacity of the Three Gorges Project to 22,500 MW, and consisted of:

- 32 main turbines, each generating 700 MW
- 2 auxiliary turbines, each generating 50 MW
- Total projected annual generation: 88.241 billion kWh

From an economic perspective, the six additional underground turbines provided poor returns. The original 26 turbines at the Three Gorges Dam had an average annual generation of 84 billion kWh, meaning each unit produced 3.231 billion kWh per year. By contrast, the underground power station's six new turbines collectively generated 3.511 billion kWh, averaging only 585 million kWh per turbine—a mere 18% of the efficiency of the original units.

So why did the NDRC approve the underground expansion in 2008 when the Three Gorges Project was already nearing completion? The answer lies not in energy

¹³ *The National Development and Reform Commission Approves the Construction of the Three Gorges Underground Power Station and Backup Power Station*, September 19, 2008, Source: Xinhua News Agency, published on the *Central People's Government Portal*, https://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2008-09/19/content_1100170.htm

demand but in preserving the title of the world's largest hydropower station by annual output.

In 2006 and 2007, the Itaipu Dam added two more 700 MW turbines. The increase in annual electricity generation placed it on track to surpass the Three Gorges Project's original 84 billion kWh output. To maintain China's leadership in global hydropower, the government rushed to expand Three Gorges capacity.

By May 2012, all six turbines of the Three Gorges Underground Power Station were operational, thus ensuring the Three Gorges Project remained the world's largest hydroelectric facility in terms of installed capacity and annual generation.

For years, the Three Gorges Dam and Itaipu Dam have been locked in a fierce competition for the title of the world's top hydropower project.

Before 2014, Itaipu consistently outperformed Three Gorges in annual electricity generation, holding the world record for 13 consecutive years. However, in 2014, the Three Gorges Dam surpassed Itaipu for the first time, producing 98.819 billion kWh, compared to Itaipu's 87.8 billion kWh.

The competition remained intense. In 2015 and 2016, Itaipu reclaimed the lead, with its 2016 output reaching 103.1 billion kWh, setting a new world record for annual electricity generation by a single hydropower station. However, from 2017 onward, Three Gorges once again outproduced Itaipu, securing its dominance. Finally, in 2020 Three Gorges set a new world record with 111.8 billion kWh, holding this title through 2023. The 2024 generation figures have yet to be released, leaving the final outcome uncertain.

Although Chinese state media frequently claim flood control is the primary goal of the Three Gorges Project, official reporting suggests otherwise. On April 5, 2006, CCTV published an article titled, "One Million Three Gorges Migrants in Exchange for Electricity to Light Up Half of China," written by Xinhua journalists Wei Cheng, Liu Jian, and Guo Li. The headline itself reveals the real motivation behind the project: electricity generation.

Some Chinese observers have drawn parallels between the competing dams (Three Gorges vs. Itaipu) and the famous Chinese saying from the Three Kingdoms

era: “Why was Zhuge Liang born if Zhou Yu already existed?” The implication is clear: Itaipu's 18 turbines pale in comparison to Three Gorges' 32 turbines—a difference that even elementary school students can recognize.

However, the true competition is not about turbine numbers but efficiency—measured by the average operational hours of the hydropower generators.

- Itaipu's peak annual generation was 103.1 billion kWh in 2016, with an average turbine utilization time of 7,364 hours per year (out of 8,760 total hours).
- Three Gorges' peak generation was 111.8 billion kWh in 2020, but its average turbine utilization time was only 5,244 hours.
- Itaipu's efficiency was 1.40 times higher than Three Gorges.

Even in their lowest output years:

- Itaipu's lowest generation was 66.369 billion kWh in 2021, with an average turbine utilization time of 4,741 hours.
- Three Gorges' lowest generation was 78.79 billion kWh in 2022, with an average turbine utilization time of just 3,502 hours.
- Itaipu was still 1.35 times more efficient than Three Gorges.

Despite losing its world record for installed capacity and annual generation, Itaipu remains superior in efficiency and power output per turbine.

Beyond electricity generation, the human cost of these projects tells another story:

- The official figure for the Three Gorges resettlement project is 1.13 million people, but the actual total is estimated at 1.5 million.
- By contrast, Itaipu displaced only 40,000 people—meaning Three Gorges relocated over 30 times more people than Itaipu.

On December 20, 2022, China cemented its dominance in global hydropower by bringing the Baihetan Hydropower Station online.

- With 16 turbines, each generating 1,000 MW, Baihetan's total installed capacity of 16,000 MW surpassed Itaipu's 14,000 MW, making it the world's second-largest hydropower station, after Three Gorges.
- This means China now holds both the first and second spots in global hydropower rankings, pushing Itaipu down to third place.
- However, Baihetan's average annual generation is only 64.1 billion kWh, falling short of Itaipu's output.

As the competition for the world's top hydropower project continues, efficiency remains Itaipu's key advantage over China's megadams.

Just as China was celebrating the Three Gorges Dam's continued reign as the world's largest hydropower project, a new contender emerged: the Grand Inga Dam in Africa.

4. The Congo River: Africa's Hydropower Giant

The Grand Inga Dam is planned for construction on the Congo, one of the world's most powerful rivers. Originating in the Chambeshi River in Zambia, the Congo River flows through Zambia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the Republic of the Congo, before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean.

With a total length of 4,640 kilometers, the Congo River is the ninth longest river in the world. However, in terms of watershed area (3.7 million square kilometers) and annual discharge (13,026 billion cubic meters), it ranks second globally, surpassed only by the Amazon River.

For comparison:

- The Yangtze River is longer than the Congo River (6,300 km, ranking third in the world) but has a smaller watershed area (1.8 million square kilometers) and lower annual discharge (9,600 billion cubic meters, ranking fourth globally).

Detailed information on the Grand Inga Project remains scarce and fragmented.

Located 225 kilometers from Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the project site is home to the Inga Falls, which give the dam its

name. Since two smaller hydropower stations have already been built in the area, the new project is specifically referred to as “Grand Inga”.

Grand Inga is planned to consist of six dams, with an installed capacity ranging from 40,000 MW to 70,000 MW. The most frequently cited estimate is 44,000 MW, with an annual generation capacity of 300 billion kWh.

For comparison:

- Three Gorges Dam has an installed capacity of 22,500 MW and an annual generation of 88.241 billion kWh, with a peak generation of 118.1 billion kWh in 2020.
- If Grand Inga’s 44,000 MW capacity is realized, it would be twice the size of Three Gorges in terms of capacity.
- If its 300 billion kWh annual generation is achieved, it would generate three times more electricity than Three Gorges.

This stark difference exposes Three Gorges’ inefficiencies, as Grand Inga would produce significantly more electricity with only twice the capacity. Once completed, Grand Inga will surpass Three Gorges in both installed capacity and electricity generation, stripping China of its two hydropower world records.

Fortunately for China’s hydropower supremacy, Grand Inga has faced numerous delays:

- 2011: The DRC and South Africa signed an agreement to jointly develop the project.
- 2013: The DRC government commissioned a joint study by American and French firms to design the construction plan.
- The BOT model (Build-Operate-Transfer) was adopted, allowing foreign companies to finance, build, and operate the dam for 30 years before transferring ownership to the DRC government.
- Half the electricity was planned for export to South Africa, while at least 25% was earmarked for domestic mining operations.

- 2012: Australia's BHP Billiton, which owns extensive mining operations in the DRC, initially planned to invest in Grand Inga but withdrew from the project.
- 2015: The DRC government reopened international bidding.
- 2018: A Chinese consortium—led by China Three Gorges Corporation, State Grid Corporation of China, and China Hydropower—teamed up with Spain's ACS and AEE and won the contract, defeating a South Korean-Canadian alliance.
- 2020: Spain's ACS withdrew, leaving the Chinese companies and Spain's AEE to renegotiate their joint venture, with China bearing 75% of the costs.
- Due to COVID-19 and other factors, construction has yet to begin.

Further complicating matters, recent legal issues involving Chinese nationals in the DRC have intensified pressure on the Three Gorges Group and other Chinese firms involved in the project.

According to an Associated Press report on January 14, 2025, three Chinese citizens were sentenced to seven years in prison and fined \$600,000 for illegal mining activities in the DRC.¹⁴

- They were arrested on January 4, carrying 10 gold bars and \$400,000 in cash.
- The charges included fraud, money laundering, and robbery.
- Their lawyer argued the ruling was unfair and announced plans to appeal.

These legal troubles follow previous attacks on Chinese companies, employee deaths, and temporary shutdowns of Chinese mining operations in the DRC.

¹⁴ *Three Chinese Nationals Sentenced to Seven Years in Prison for Illegal Mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, January 15, 2025, Voice of America, <https://www.voachinese.com/a/chinese-citizens-sentenced-to-7-years-in-prison-for-illegal-mining-in-congo-20250114/7937313.html>

With increasing anti-China sentiment and geopolitical risks, the Grand Inga Dam remains uncertain, but if completed, it will inevitably dethrone the Three Gorges Dam as the world's largest hydropower project.

5. The Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project: The “Super Successor” to the Three Gorges Dam

From August 19 to 22, 2006, a delegation led by Cai Qihua, then Director of the Yangtze River Water Resources Commission (later Vice Minister of Water Resources), conducted an on-site survey at the proposed Baiqun Hydropower Station in Medog County, Nyingchi Prefecture, Tibet—a location near the de facto border with India. The Yangtze River Water Resources Commission, which oversees water resource management and development planning for southwestern rivers, proposed a development plan with an installed capacity of approximately 52.6 million kW.

On March 11, 2021, the Yarlung Tsangpo Lower Reaches Hydropower Project was officially included in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) and 2035 Long-Term Goals. While approved by the National People's Congress, the plan did not disclose detailed technical specifications for the project.

On July 21, 2021, Xi Jinping personally visited Nyingchi, Tibet, by plane, inspecting a potential dam site on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo River—a trip that underscored his direct involvement in the project's decision-making and strategic deployment.¹⁵

On December 25, 2024, Xinhua News Agency announced that the Chinese government had officially approved the Yarlung Tsangpo Lower Reaches Hydropower Project.

¹⁵ *Xi Jinping Emphasizes the Full Implementation of the Party's Tibet Governance Strategy During His Visit to Tibet: Writing a New Chapter for Long-Term Stability and High-Quality Development on the Plateau*, July 23, 2021, Source: Xinhua News Agency, published on the *Central People's Government Portal*, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-07/23/content_5626895.htm

By December 26, 2024, Chinese state media had already labeled the project as the “Super Successor” to the Three Gorges Dam.¹⁶ In essence, this project is intended to surpass the Three Gorges Dam and become the world’s largest hydropower project.

The scale and capacity estimates for the Yarlung Tsangpo project have been drawn largely from statements made in 2020 by Yan Zhiyong, then Chairman of Power Construction Corporation of China. According to his remarks:

- The project’s installed capacity would be “equivalent to three Three Gorges power stations,” falling between 60,000 MW and 70,000 MW.
- It would generate up to 300 billion kWh of electricity annually, a figure three times that of the Three Gorges Dam.
- Other reports suggest an installed capacity exceeding 44,000 MW, reinforcing the claim that the project’s annual electricity generation will reach 300 billion kWh—three times that of Three Gorges.

The primary goal of constructing the Yarlung Tsangpo Lower Reaches Hydropower Project is to secure the Chinese Communist Party’s dominance in the global hydropower sector, ensuring that China remains home to the world’s largest hydropower project.

6. Why Are the Chinese Obsessed with Being No.1?

The Chinese government has spared no cost in constructing the Three Gorges Dam, with the sole purpose of surpassing the Itaipu Dam and claiming the crown jewel of global hydropower projects. Now, with the Grand Inga Dam poised to overtake Three Gorges as the largest hydropower project in the world, China has responded by pushing forward with the Yarlung Tsangpo Lower Reaches Hydropower Project, dubbed the “Super Successor” to the Three Gorges Dam. The objective? To ensure China retains its title as the world’s hydropower champion. Everything revolves around securing that No.1 ranking.

¹⁶ *Tianji Tea Bureau: Hong Kong Media Reports—Power Generation Three Times That of Three Gorges, China Officially Approves the Construction of a Super Hydropower Station in Tibet*, December 26, 2024, <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20241226A037YP00>

On Zhihu, China's equivalent of Quora, someone once asked: "Why do Chinese people always strive to be first?"¹⁷

One response reads:

"Because China's history is far too glorious! Compared to the Chinese, the rest of the world is insignificant! Look at Chinese history, then compare it to the histories of other nations, and you'll understand! Compared to Chinese history, Europe is nothing more than a collection of small villages, Africa is just tribes dancing around bonfires, and the Americas are mere hunter-gatherer societies. The world's history dims in comparison to China's! Without comparison, there is no pain! With such a stark contrast, how could the Chinese not be No.1? China has been first for 5,000 years—why shouldn't we continue to be first? Those who could compete with the Chinese have long since vanished!"

Such insular and self-congratulatory views stem from years of patriotic and nationalist indoctrination, leading many to believe, "China has been No.1 for 5,000 years—why shouldn't we stay No.1?" However, when people truly step outside China and experience the world, they often discover a very different reality.

In his article "An Analysis of China's Extreme Nationalist Ideology," Zhang Chao¹⁸ argues that modern-day extreme nationalism in China partially originates from ancient Confucian hierarchical culture. For centuries, China saw itself as a vast, resource-rich civilization with an illustrious history, one of the world's four great ancient civilizations. Historically, the Chinese viewed their country as the center of the world, with the Han ethnicity regarding neighboring groups as "barbarians" (蛮) and "savages" (夷).

Furthermore, as liberal thought was suppressed in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s, extreme nationalism surged, reaching a peak in the mid-1990s with

¹⁷ *Why Do Chinese People Always Strive to Be Number One?*, Zhihu, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/62427882>

¹⁸ Zhang Chao: *An Analysis of Extreme Nationalist Ideologies in China*, *Modern China Studies*, MCS 2004 Issue 3, <https://www.modernchinastudies.org/us/issues/past-issues/85-mcs-2004-issue-3/867-2012-01-05-15-34-38.html>

publications such as *China Can Say No* and *China Still Can Say No*—books that epitomized the rise of Chinese ultra-nationalism.

In China, this kind of extreme nationalism is often rebranded as “patriotism”.

Zhang Chao, drawing on the theories of David Miller and Vernon Bogdanor, defines extreme nationalism as an ideology rooted in rejection of cosmopolitanism. He explains:

“Nationalist sentiment in this context refers to a political approach that seeks to advance national interests at the expense of other countries and without regard for values such as refraining from violence, adhering to international law, or maintaining international cooperation through bilateral or multilateral treaties. This form of nationalism differs from general nationalism in the same way that selfishness differs from individualism. A selfish person pursues their own interests with no regard for others, whereas individualism holds that the pursuit of one’s interests must also respect others’ right to do the same.”

While benign nationalism and extreme nationalism may appear similar—both invoking patriotism to rally public support—the latter is far more insidious, as it masks its true political nature in the guise of national pride.

In 1980, Deng Xiaoping, after inspecting the Three Gorges region, expressed his support for the dam’s construction. In 1992, the National People’s Congress officially approved the project. The Three Gorges Dam was built under the banner of patriotism, urging people to sacrifice their personal interests for the collective good, all while obsessively pursuing the status of world’s largest hydropower project, regardless of its social, economic, and environmental costs. This is the hallmark of extreme nationalism.

In 2021, Xi Jinping visited Nyingchi in Tibet, personally inspecting a potential dam site for the Yarlung Tsangpo Lower Reaches Hydropower Project—a move that signified his direct oversight and endorsement. The project was later incorporated into China’s 14th Five-Year Plan, with its primary objective being to maintain China’s status as the world’s top hydropower nation.

Ultimately, the Yarlung Tsangpo Lower Reaches Hydropower Project is no different from the Three Gorges Dam—both are products of extreme nationalism.

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