

**Asia Research Institute
Working Paper Series No. 254**

**War on Water:
The Maoist State and the 1954 Yangzi Floods**

Chris Courtney

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore
arichc@nus.edu.sg

SEPTEMBER 2016



The **ARI Working Paper Series** is published electronically by the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore.

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each Working Paper.

ARI Working Papers cannot be republished, reprinted, or reproduced in any format without the permission of the paper's author or authors.

Note: The views expressed in each paper are those of the author or authors of the paper. They do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the Asia Research Institute, its Editorial Committee or of the National University of Singapore.

Citations of this electronic publication should be made in the following manner: Author, "Title," ARI Working Paper, No. #, Date, www.nus.ari.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm. For instance, Smith, John, "Ethnic Relations in Singapore," ARI Working Paper, No. 1, June 2003, www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm.

Asia Research Institute Editorial Committee

Michelle Miller – Chair

Eric Kerr

Shekhar Krishnan

Creighton Paul Connolly

Valerie Yeo

Asia Research Institute

National University of Singapore

AS8, #07-01, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent,

Singapore 119260

Tel: (65) 6516 3810

Fax: (65) 6779 1428

Website: www.ari.nus.edu.sg

Email: arisec@nus.edu.sg

The Asia Research Institute (ARI) was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The mission of the Institute is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region, located at one of its communications hubs. ARI engages the social sciences broadly defined, and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. Through frequent provision of short-term research appointments it seeks to be a place of encounters between the region and the world. Within NUS it works particularly with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Law and Design, to support conferences, lectures, and graduate study at the highest level.

**War on Water:
The Maoist State and the 1954 Yangzi Floods**

Chris Courtney

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

arichc@nus.edu.sg

ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical reappraisal of the Maoist state's response to the 1954 Yangzi Floods. It uses a variety of sources, including previously classified government reports and oral history testimony to challenge the official narrative. Far from being a remarkable victory for the new government as it was portrayed at the time, the flood precipitated a humanitarian catastrophe that took almost one hundred and fifty thousands lives. Government hydraulic policies were partly to blame, as the vast majority of disaster victims were located in rural areas that engineers flooded deliberately by opening sluice gates. In addition to revealing the true scale of the flood, this article also uses the disaster as a prism to examine the early Maoist state. The government's combative environmental policies turned disaster governance into a war on water. This approach had certain benefits, particularly in terms of organising an effective urban relief campaign. Unfortunately, rural policies had fostered an atmosphere of distrust, which encouraged many villagers to resist government policies. Ultimately, the flood revealed the profound impact that a political context can have upon the outcome of an environmental hazard.

On the banks of the Yangzi River in the central Chinese city of Wuhan the face of Mao Zedong stares down from a large stone obelisk. A casual observer might be forgiven for assuming that this imposing architectural feature was some kind of war memorial. In fact, it commemorates a great flood that swept down the Yangzi in 1954. Far from being a sombre monument, this obelisk celebrates a triumphant human victory over nature. Embossed reliefs depict heroic figures doing battle with torrents of water, clutching farm tools, shoulder poles, and political paraphernalia such as flags and banners. Erected at the height of the Cultural Revolution in 1969, this monument reproduces an unambiguous image of a commanding state. Scholars today tend to be suspicious of propaganda produced at this time, given the extent to which the state monopolised all forms of representation. Surprisingly, however, no historian has yet challenged the triumphalist narrative depicted upon this monument.



Figure 1: A relief from the flood monument. The slogan reads “Quotations of Chairman Mao: Be resolute and do not fear sacrifices, surmount every difficulty in order to win victory.”¹

This article offers a critical reappraisal of the Maoist state’s response to the 1954 Yangzi Floods. It focuses upon Hubei province, which was the epicentre of the disaster. Building upon the methodology developed by scholars such as Ralph Thaxton and Jeremy Brown, it utilises a combination of textual and oral sources.² Contemporary newspapers and other official publications yield little reliable information, yet they do offer a critical insight into the operations and mentality of state, revealing how the crisis was depicted at the time. Internal (*neibu*) cadre reports and the disaster investigations conducted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) provide a far greater insight into the reality on the ground, albeit one still steeped in the ideological idiosyncrasies of the era.³ Oral history testimony, in the form of fifteen interviews conducted with flood survivors, helps to further unpick the stitches of the official narrative.⁴ The memories of Hubei residents have, of course, been eroded by time and shaped by the exigencies of half a century of dramatic life experiences, yet the voices of those who lived through the disaster offer a vital corrective to otherwise mono-vocal state discourse.

¹ Photograph by the author.

² Ralph Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jeremy Brown, *City Versus Countryside in Mao's China: Negotiating the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³ Some original cadre reports have been published in an archival collection. Hubei sheng yijiuwusi nian fangxun kanghong dang'an xuanbian (Wuhan: Hubei sheng dang'an guan, 1998), pp. 225-27. (Hereafter referred to as HFKDX). Others were located in the Hubei Provincial Archives.

⁴ The author conducted fifteen in Hubei between 2009-2010 and 2013.

The picture that emerges from these sources differs profoundly from that offered by previous histories. Far from being a victory over nature, the 1954 flood precipitated a humanitarian catastrophe—possibly the most lethal inundation in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁵ Nearly one hundred and fifty thousand people were killed. Most casualties were concentrated in a series of rural areas that the government flooded deliberately in order to protect cities, which were seen as the crucial engines of economic development. Contrary to contemporary reports, however, the strategy of safeguarding cities was not wholly successful. Large swathes of the city of Wuhan were flooded, causing twenty thousand people to become refugees.

What can the 1954 flood teach us more broadly about the nature of governance in Maoist China? Anthony Oliver-Smith has characterised disasters as *crise revelatrice*, during which “the fundamental features of society and culture are laid bare in stark relief by the reduction of priorities to basic social, cultural, and material necessities.”⁶ The flood certainly revealed much about the political and economic imperatives governing life under the early Maoist state. One of the most pressing imperatives was to eradicate all enemies of New China—even if these enemies happened to be rivers. Disaster management was represented as an all out war on water—a fight in which the nascent state would marshal its great human resources to tame rivers. Given that the CCP had known little but war over the past few decades, it is perhaps unsurprising that governors treated the flood as yet another foe to be vanquished. Propagandists utilised all their skills to encourage workers and soldiers who were on the frontline defending the dyke network. Meanwhile, engineers were empowered to unleash hydrological weapons—in the form of a recently finished set of sluice gates—against the Yangzi. Unfortunately, very little thought was given to the inevitable humanitarian consequences of these interventions. The results were catastrophic, as sluice gates were opened onto still inhabited areas of the countryside.

The 1954 flood was not simply a technical failure of hydraulic policies. It was a disaster incubated in a very particular political context. With few exceptions, historians studying how the Maoist party state coped with disasters have focussed upon the famine of the late 1950s. This is not without justification, given that this was one of the worst catastrophes in human history. Recently, Lauri Paltemaa has taken a more comprehensive view, examining how the party state coped with a series of disasters affecting the northern city of Tianjin throughout the Maoist era. Although he does not deny the horror of the famine, and the key role that the authoritarian state played in its genesis, Paltemaa found that on occasions the state was able to respond relatively well to crises. The organisation of the state facilitated efficient and expedient disaster relief.⁷ Although this article highlights a hidden tragedy at the heart of disaster governance in 1954, it concurs with Paltemaa in recognising that, in certain respects at least, the Maoist state was able to respond to environmental catastrophes relatively effectively.

At the same time, the unilateral and often repressive policies of the early 1950s fostered a caustic political environment, in which many citizens were not sure whether they could trust official assurances. This distrust created an atmosphere that was not conducive to conducting an effective relief effort. The government attempted to generate compliance by using propaganda to project an

⁵ The 1959 China floods apparently caused two hundred thousand deaths, yet this mortality is closely connected with the anthropogenic famine of that year.
See http://www.emdat.be/disaster_profiles/index.html accessed 06.09.2016.

⁶ Anthony Oliver-Smith, 'Anthropological Research on Hazards and Disaster', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 25 (1996), 303-28.

⁷ Lauri Paltemaa, *Managing Famine, Flood, and Earthquake in China: Tianjin, 1958-1985* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

image of supreme control over both humans and nature. On occasions this appeared to work. Some citizens seemed to embrace an ethos of voluntarism, if only as a somewhat instrumental performance of regime compliance. Elsewhere, however, communities actively resisted disaster governance, believing that the CCP was using evacuation to dupe them into forced collectivisation. Ultimately, the 1954 flood revealed both the best and worst elements of CCP rule. The same structures of control that facilitated rapid mobilisation and distribution of resources also generated a sense of distrust and insecurity that inhibited disaster governance.

TAKING OVER HUBEI

In April 1949 a ragtag armada began to cross the Yangzi. Tens of thousands of soldiers packed onto boats, clung onto bales of straw, or drifted on inflated pigskins. These were the advanced troops of the People's Liberation Army, which had amassed two million strong on the northern banks of the river, awaiting the final push south that herald the victory of the Chinese Communist Party.⁸ Having taken the Nationalist capital of Nanjing, one of the three divisions moved west. On May 15th they entered the city of Wuhan, the political and economic capital of the middle Yangzi region. Five days later, a native of Hubei, a carpenter's son named Li Xiannian, was appointed to the highest position in the region, as provincial Party Secretary.⁹

Having secured the capital, the CCP set about pacifying the province. They were confronted not only by hostile military forces but also by inclement weather. During the late spring of 1949 Hubei began to experience the worst flooding in a decade. By July 7th the water in rivers had reached the highest level since the catastrophic floods of 1935. Soon dykes along the Yangzi and the Han began to collapse.¹⁰ As a result of this summer deluge the CCP was not able to secure Hubei until November 1949.¹¹ Communist rule had been baptized in floodwater. Over the next few years, the regime would seek to control the capricious rivers that had long defined life in the province; hydraulic engineering became a key component of state building.

The water control policies of the early Maoist state formed part of a broader portfolio of reforms. These had the dual aims of consolidating political hegemony and reconfiguring the economy. The CCP initially adopted a somewhat conciliatory policy to the merchants and industrialists in urban areas such as Wuhan, limiting their activities to imposing a far more disciplined system of taxation. No doubt many businesspeople longed for the days when duties could be evaded by a discreet payment to a corrupt Nationalist official.¹² Yet it was not until 1952 with the so-called Five-Antis (*Wufan*) campaign, that the assault upon private commerce began in earnest. By eroding the power of traditional elites, and organising urban citizens through the work units system (*danwei*), the CCP hoped to replace the once thriving commercial economy with state-owned enterprises.¹³ This new

⁸ Odd Westad, *Decisive Encounters : The Chinese Civil War, 1946-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.241-4.

⁹ *Hubei shengzhi: dashi ji* (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1990), p557; Westad, *Decisive Encounters*, p.47

¹⁰ *Hubei shengzhi: dashiji* p565. This was actually the second successive year of flooding. In the summer of 1948 forty-three counties in Hubei had suffered inundation. *Hubei shengzhi: minzheng* (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1990), pp.113-114.

¹¹ Westad, *Decisive Encounters* p.284; *Hubei Shengzhi: dashi ji*, p566.

¹² Shaoguang Wang, 'The Construction of State Extractive Capacity: Wuhan, 1949-1953', *Modern China*, 27 (2001), 229-61.

¹³ Mark W. Frazier, *The Making of the Chinese Industrial Workplace: State, Revolution, and Labor Management* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.132.

role for cities was to have a profound influence upon the outcome of the 1954 flood. Hydraulic engineers would be called upon to protect state-owned urban industries at any cost, even if this involved sacrificing the countryside.

Profound as the changes to urban life were, they paled in comparison to the seismic shifts occurring in rural Hubei. Between 1950-1952 the countryside underwent a policy of radical land reform. Local cadres categorised families according to the inflexible class taxonomy created by the CCP. Those deemed landlords (*dizhu*) or rich peasants (*funong*) not only lost land and property but were also subject to violent persecution sessions that often culminated in execution. Meanwhile the army undertook a series of pacification campaigns designed to obliterate the last vestiges of resistance.¹⁴ Land reform proved highly popular, yet before long it became clear that this great redistribution was not all that it appeared. Rural communities found themselves subject to ever-more extractive policies of government requisitioning. In 1953 the CCP introduced a state grain monopoly, which compelled farmers to sell their surplus to the local government at a fixed price. This was followed in the spring of 1954 there was a nationwide drive to subsume individual households within larger agricultural cooperatives. The presumed efficiency savings offered by these policies were to provide the economic foundations for the policy state-led industrialisation.¹⁵ The countryside provided the economic fuel to power the engine of urban industrial growth.

It is tempting to posit a genetic link between these early rural policies and the famine that followed the Great Leap Forward between 1958-1961. Unrestricted grain requisitioning and the creation of People's Communes—which took the idea of the agricultural cooperative and mutated it to gargantuan proportions—would drive tens of millions of rural citizens to their graves. Yet it is important not to submit to an overly teleological narrative. Hayekian scholars such as Frank Dikötter and Yang Jisheng have argued that early collectivization set rural China off along the “road to serfdom,” creating a socioeconomic dynamic that would inevitably lead to disaster.¹⁶ Dikötter has argued that the state grain monopoly resulted in food shortages in many areas, including Wuhan, as early as 1954. He overlooks the fact that during that year China had experienced one of its largest weather-induced production shortfalls of the twentieth century as a result of the flood.¹⁷ Whilst by no means denying the adverse effects of Maoist economic policies—particularly the millions killed by famine—historians such as Li Huaiyin and Y.Y. Kueh have noted that collectivisation had numerous beneficial effects, including considerable infrastructural and health care developments.¹⁸ Since the

¹⁴ *Hubei shengzhi: dashi ji* pp.575; 569, 590-1.

¹⁵ Li Huaiyin, *Village China Under Socialism and Reform: A Micro-History, 1948-2008* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp.30-1.

¹⁶ This is a title of a chapter in Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation : A History of the Chinese revolution, 1945-1957* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013). Elsewhere he has argued that the Great Leap Famine “stands as a reminder of how profoundly misplaced is the idea of state planning” xii. Yang is avowedly Hayekian, see Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962*, trans. by Stacy Mosher and Jian Guo (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

¹⁷ On comparison of agricultural losses caused by disasters see Y. Y. Kueh, *Agricultural Instability in China, 1931-1990: Weather, Technology, and Institutions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ *Ibid*; Li, *Village China*.

1950s there has been a measurable improvement in rural life expectancy. Whether this was because of or in spite of collectivisation remains a matter of debate¹⁹

The 1954 flood highlighted both the benefits and detriments of early Maoist governance. Collectivisation offered what Kueh has described as an “institutional hedge” against the effects of climatic disasters. The organisation of labour into work units facilitated the rapid deployment of flood prevention workers, whilst the state controlled grain market enabled faster and more efficient relief. At the same time, however, revolutionary politics engendered a sense of insecurity. Those who had benefitted from the overturning of the established order would guard their new property fiercely, whilst those who had suffered during land reform feared a further erosion of their livelihoods. Trust was diminished further by rapacious extraction of grain. By the time of the flood, the insecure atmosphere that permeated village Hubei would make it far more difficult to organise an effective relief campaign.

TAMING THE YANGZI

In an article written in the early 1950s the journalist Di Lei used the ideology of the party state to explain Hubei’s historic water control problems. It suggested that the cause of disastrous flooding was class prejudice.²⁰ As Imperial and Republican administrators did not suffer personally during inundations, Di reasoned, they were not invested in finding a solution for the root causes of hydraulic failures, contenting themselves instead with piecemeal solutions to alleviate the symptoms of flooding. In order to advance this politicised reading of history, Di ignored the numerous elite figures, such as the late Qing polymath Wei Yuan, who had argued for exactly the kind of systemic reform he now advocated.²¹ More importantly, Di’s crude caricature of water control problems posited human agency as the only possible variable in disaster causality. In reality the problem of flooding was both environmental and anthropogenic. Humans had exacerbated natural risk by converting floodplains into arable land. They constructed embankments and dykes to ameliorate the effects of inundation, which, when poorly maintained, exacerbated flood risk. Hydraulic failures amplified the natural effects of flooding, funnelling water onto communities. The most lethal inundations occurred when the Great Jingjiang Embankment running parallel to the Yangzi collapsed, releasing huge quantities of water onto the plains. From the nineteenth century, the intensity and frequency of flooding increased dramatically.²² The most lethal inundation occurred in 1931, when a nationwide disaster killed in excess of two million people.²³

¹⁹ For Dikötter’s probably excessive estimate of 45 million fatalities during the Great Leap Famine to be true, the CCP would have had to have reduced the crude death rate from 25 to 10 per thousand during the 1950s. See Cormac Ó Gráda, ‘Great Leap into Famine: A Review Essay’, *Population and Development Review*, March 2011, p. 191–210; Frank Dikötter, *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–62* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

²⁰ Di Lei, ‘Xin Zhongguo weida de jianshe shiye-Jingjiang fenhong gongcheng’, *Luxing zazhi*, 26 (1952), 25–30.

²¹ Wei Yuan, ‘Hubei difang yi,’ in *Wei Yuan quan ji (Vol 12)* (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2004 [Qing]), pp. 368–69.

²² Zhang Jiayan, *Coping with Calamity: Environmental Change and Peasant Response in Central China, 1736–1949* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014).

²³ Chris Courtney, ‘Governing Disasters: A Comparative Analysis of the 1931, 1954 and 1998 Middle-Yangzi Floods’, in *100 Years After the Xinhai Revolution: Domestic Change, Challenges and Continuities*, ed. by Kun-Chin Lin and Jean-Marc Blanchard (London: Palgrave, 2016).

In February 1951 the government commissioned a newly established Yangzi Conservancy Authority (*Changjiang shuili weiyuanhui*) to find a solution to these problems. Chinese engineers, with the help of Soviet advisors, designed a series of flood diversion areas (*fenhong qu*) near the cities of Jiangling and Shashi in central Hubei (see Figure 2). Entry sluice gates would act as a giant discharge valve for the Yangzi, and exit sluice gates would allow engineers to drain the diversion area when the river level decreased. This scheme met with the highest approval, with Mao Zedong himself proclaiming: “For the great benefit of the people, be victorious in the construction of the flood diversion”²⁴ This project utilised a very typical form of Maoist mass mobilisation. Beginning in April 1952, three hundred thousand labourers completed construction in just seventy-five days.²⁵ Conditions were tough, with labourers being forced to work, eat, and sleep in a damp environment plagued by malarial mosquitoes.²⁶ To make matters worse, in the midst of construction the CCP launched their nationwide Three Antis (*Sanfan*) campaign to eliminate corruption, waste, and bureaucracy, meaning that workers were forced to spend their resting hours undergoing no doubt tedious self-evaluations.

Whilst workers and merchants suffered, it was the rural majority who bore the brunt. Those living in the area that had been designated for the flood diversion found themselves subject to compulsory relocation to one of ten specially designated safety areas (*anquan qu*) around the perimeter of the diversion (see Figure 2). By the end of March 1952 over 60,500 people had been resettled in the safety areas, yet many remained reluctant to abandon their ancestral homes, even when offered incentives such as money, food, and tractors. Compulsory relocations have been a perennial feature of CCP hydraulic governance. Jun Jing’s ethnographic study reveals the deep traumas suffered by one community dislocated from its proud history by dam.²⁷ The history of the forced evacuation of Hubei’s flood diversion area has yet to be written. One thing that is clear is that government was not entirely successful. Many people continued to live in what were now acutely vulnerable areas. This was to have tragic consequences in 1954 when the sluice gates were opened.

Any description of a monumental water control project cannot help but evoke the spectre of Karl Wittfogel, a historian who characterised imperial China as one of a number of “hydraulic societies,” in which the imperative to prevent floods or irrigate arable land helped to foster a highly centralised mode of governance, which he described this as “oriental despotism.” The vast archive pertaining to this history of water control in China has proven Wittfogel largely wrong, at least for the late imperial period. Hydraulic initiatives were often highly localised, with the default state position being one of delegation rather than megalomaniacal control.²⁸

Ironically, at the very same time that Wittfogel was penning his most famous exposition of oriental despotism, the Maoist state was seeking to exert a perhaps unprecedented degree of power over the hydraulic network. Projects such as the Yangzi Flood Diversion suggested that the party-state enjoyed an “unrivalled position of operational leadership and organizational control” over nature

²⁴ *Hubei shengzhi: dashi ji*, pp.599-601

²⁵ 'Qishiwu tian wanchengle weida de Jingjiang fenhong gongcheng', *Qianjin*, 262 (1952).

²⁶ Yao Ting and Yu Chun. '30 wan ren 75 tian dazao jianguochu zui da shuili gongcheng' *Wenshi bolan*, August 2009.

²⁷ Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

²⁸ Pierre-Étienne Will, 'State Intervention in the Administration of a Hydraulic Infrastructure: The Example of Hubei Province in Late Imperial Times', in *The Scope of State Power in China*, ed. by Stuart R. Schram (Hong Kong: Chinese University press, 1985); Peter C. Perdue, *Exhausting the Earth: State and Peasant in Hunan, 1500-1850* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987).

and the human population.²⁹ Over the next few decades, the CCP would use this power to reshape the hydrosphere more profoundly than any polity in history. It might be tempting, then, to turn Wittfogel on his head, suggesting that it was not until the state achieved despotic power that it was able to create a functioning hydraulic society. Yet even at its most commanding, the CCP state never enjoyed the kind of despotic power that Wittfogel envisioned. The 1954 flood demonstrated painfully that the government could control neither rivers nor people completely.

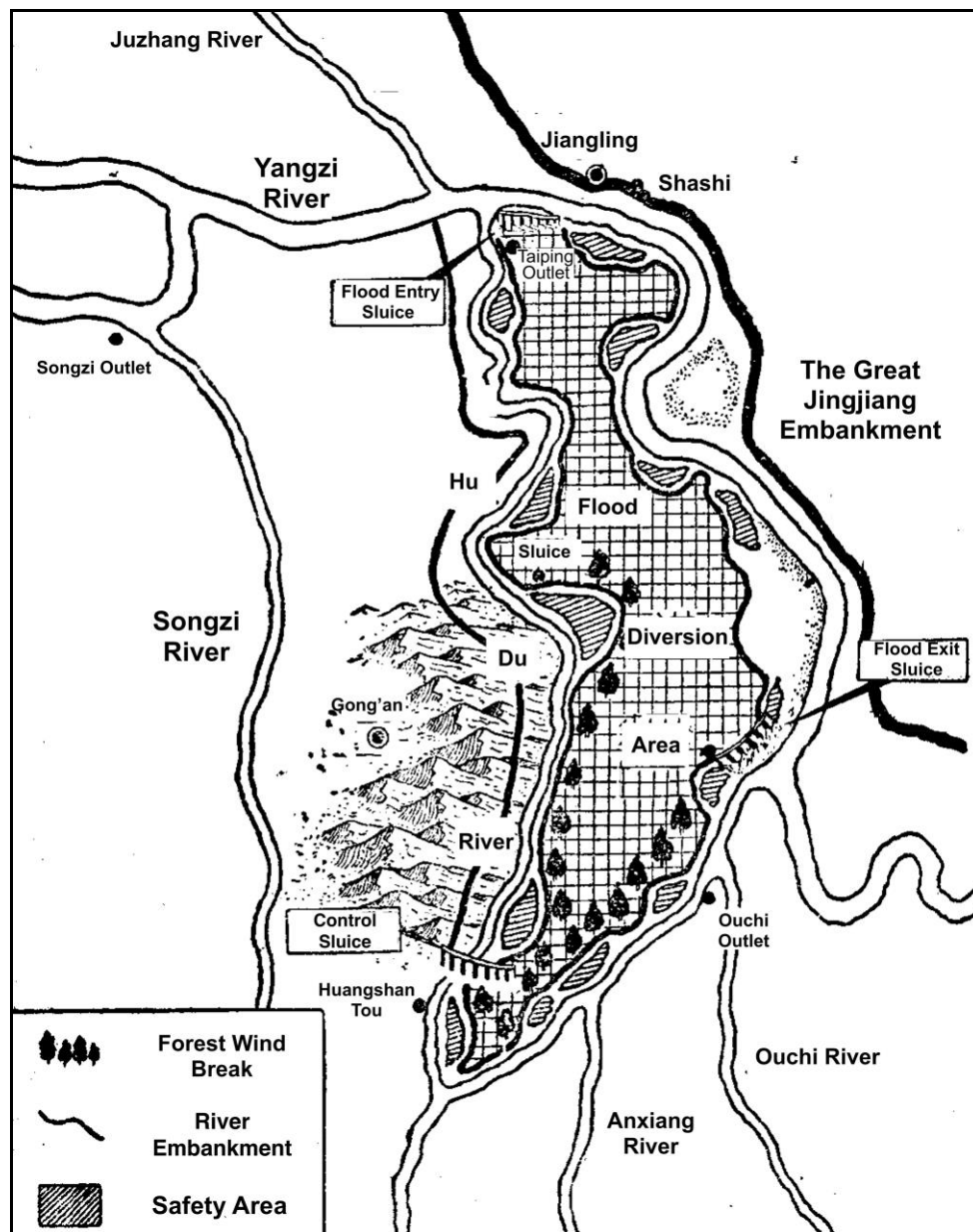


Figure 2. A Map of one of the Yangzi Flood Diversion Areas, 1952³⁰

²⁹ Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957), p.47

³⁰ Adapted and translated by the author from Di, 'Xin Zhongguo.' NB In Chinese this is known as the Jing River Flood Diversion (*Jingjiang fenhong*), the Jing River being the name for the stretch of the Yangzi in central Hubei

THE WAR ON WATER

It started raining in the spring and did not stop for fifty-eight days.³¹ The flood that ensued actually comprised a range of differing water hazards. Around 1,500,000 people fell victim to mountain floods (*shan hong*), when great surges of water and debris swept along the tributaries that drained the highlands. Those not drowned found their fields covered in sandy deposits leaving them uncultivable. On the plains below some 2,250,000 people were from less dramatic yet equally devastating waterlogging disasters (*zizai*). Between May and June they struggled desperately to drain their fields, whilst the rain poured down unremittingly. These people lost their summer crops, and many were prevented from planting a winter insurance harvest. The worst was yet to come. A series of storms struck in July, causing polder dykes throughout Hubei to suffer breaches (*kuikou*).³² Around 3,780,000 people would be inundated as river water was funnelled through the human-made topography onto their homes. One farmer from the hinterland of Wuhan recalled how she was carrying manure to the fields “when I heard people crying and shouting. I turned around to see a huge wave. It was really white, like a sheet.” Another described how his family had scrambled to their boat in order to flee to a local hillside. Thousands were not so fortunate, being drowned or buried alive by the terrifying cascade. By the summer of 1954, more than ten million people—or nearly two fifths of Hubei—were under water.³³ The engineers tasked with maintaining the hydraulic system now sought desperately to prevent further destruction.

In Republican China, hydraulic engineers had been fond of quoting water control treatises by classical theorists such as such Mencius.³⁴ In 1954, the engineer Tao Shuzeng chose instead to quote the classical military theorist Sun Zi, arguing that engineers “must know themselves and their enemies (*zhiji zhibi*)” in order to win the “battle (*zhandou*)” with rivers.³⁵ Judith Shapiro has argued that such highly combative rhetoric reflected the ultra-utilitarian approach to nature taken by the Maoist state. Yet although the Maoist state was undoubtedly more extreme, however, it was hardly unique in its deployment of combative rhetoric. The speeches of leaders such as Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek did not lack the will to conquer nature—merely the power to act upon their grandiose schemes.³⁶ Furthermore, if the language of conflict was particularly prevalent in the 1950s, this had as much to do with decades of warfare as it did with Soviet-influenced ideology. As Pamela Crossley has observed, the cessation of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula in 1953 marked the end of an unbroken chain of armed conflicts that stretched right back to 1926.³⁷ With Taiwan still under Nationalist control, war remained an imminent possibility. For the CCP, then, the 1954 flood was

³¹ Zong Yongqiang and Chen Xiqing, 'The 1998 Flood on the Yangtze, China', *Natural Hazards*, 22 (2000), 165–184.

³² 'Hubei sheng zaiqing jiankuang, September 6th 1954,' *HFKDX* pp. 225-27.

³³ Estimates vary somewhat (see below). One report suggests a figure as high as 10,347,000. 'Hubei sheng zaiqing jiankuang'

³⁴ See for example 'Kongzi dachen yu shuizai, *Guowen zhouban*, 8, no. 35 (1931).

³⁵ Tao Dinglai, Li Senlin and Zhou Yeqing, 'Tao Shuzeng yu 1954 nian Wuhan da hongshui *Wuhan wenshi ziliao*, Vol. 12 (2005), pp.20-23.

³⁶ A clear example of this is the universal support for the Three Gorges Dam project, shared by every major Chinese leader since Sun Yat-sen. See Yin Liangwu, *The Long Quest For Greatness: China's Decision to Launch the Three Gorges Project* (Unpublished Thesis, Washington University, 1996).

³⁷ See Pamela Crossley, *The Wobbling Pivot - China Since 1800: An Interpretive History* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p.180.

part of broader existential struggle. As the *People's Daily* put it “the imperialists and Chiang Kai-shek [...] cannot fight us, and so hope that natural disasters will destroy us.”³⁸

Chinese leaders were still very much war leaders - their mode of thinking combative by default. The influence of war went beyond the numerous military allusions that peppered official discourse. It permeated the governance style of CCP leaders, who had risen to prominence in the midst of various conflicts.³⁹ Ralph Thaxton has argued that this legacy begat a highly confrontational work style, inspiring local cadres to make hasty and unilateral decisions.⁴⁰ Hydraulic governors were subject to a similar urgency of command. They adopted bold strategies, often with minimal thought for the humanitarian consequences. Having convinced themselves they were at war with water, they were determined to win regardless of the collateral damage. By the summer of 1954 they already lost a number of battles, leaving an estimated 6,660,000 *mu* (4,400 km²) of land under water.⁴¹ Yet Wuhan had yet to be flooded. Throughout the summer, the city limits would become the front line. Their defence would determine the outcome of the war on water. The race was now on to save the city.

The flood prevention campaign relied upon huge amounts of labour extracted from soldiers, urban labourers sent by work units, and rural citizens. Providing this labour was a compulsory duty of the citizen, yet propagandists sought to represent it as a form of volunteerism. Periodicals such as the *Yangzi Daily (Changjiang Ribao)* published accounts of heroic workers dedicating themselves to the flood prevention campaign.⁴² In spite of obvious embellishments, these exemplar narratives are useful historical sources. They offer an insight into the expectations that the state placed upon citizens. The extent to which propaganda was used to encourage mass participation marked something of a shift in disaster governance.⁴³ Previous political systems had extracted labour through corvée or in exchange for relief. In 1954, by contrast, citizens were enjoined to participate willingly, even as they were being compelled to do so. Flood heroes helped perpetuate the Maoist paradox of compulsory volunteerism—an idiosyncratic mode of state-society relations that would be one of the defining features of the political system. Those championed in official propaganda displayed an unwavering dedication to labour—much like the Stakhanovite workers of the Soviet Union - yet they also indulged a penchant for ostentatious acts of self-sacrifice.⁴⁴ Within the evolution of the Maoist ideal subject, they occupied a position somewhere between the heroism of wartime martyrs and the trudging obedience of the most famous exemplar Lei Feng—the smiling peasant/soldier/worker who was content to be an anonymous “screw in the revolutionary machine.”⁴⁵

³⁸ *Renmin Ribao* 24th October 1954.

³⁹ When the rains failed in Hubei in 1952 the party launched a “war on drought (*fanghan kanghan douzheng*)”. *Hubei shengzhi: dashi ji*, p566. Around the same time Zhou Enlai described diplomacy as “a war of words and a war of swords.” Anne-Marie Brady, *Friend of China: The Myth of Rewi Alley* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p.71.

⁴⁰ Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention*, pp.84-5.

⁴¹ 'Hubei sheng zaiqing jiankuang'.

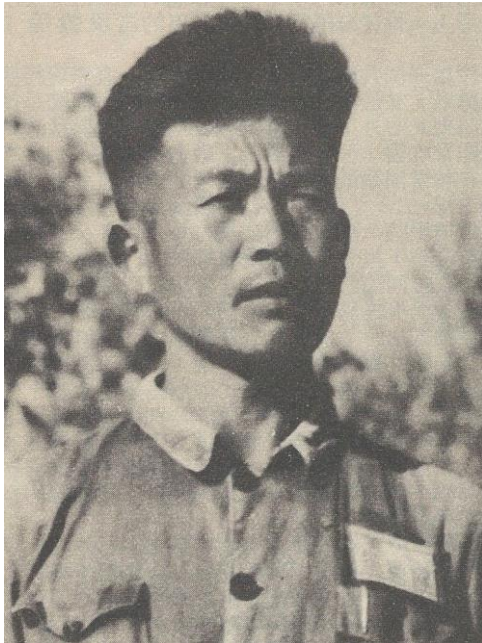
⁴² There are articles throughout the year, see for example *Changjiang Ribao*, 20th August 1954.

⁴³ As is also observed in Paltemaa, *Managing Famine, Flood, and Earthquake*.

⁴⁴ On the Stakhanovite campaign see Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁴⁵ Shi Yonggang eds. *Lei Feng 1940-1962* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2006).

Wang Maoshan was a typical flood hero. He was said to have worked for nine days without rest, spending several hours neck deep in sewage, and continuing to stack sandbags even after he had developed a heart complaint.⁴⁶ The form of labouring masculinity and disregard for personal safety that Wang displayed, was not reserved solely for men. Lu Youzhi plunged herself into freezing water blocking a breach, using her own body as a weapon against the enemy of water.⁴⁷ In a marked contrast to Confucian norms, worker heroes ignored personal obligations, instead choosing to partake in flood prevention. Wang continued to work even after hearing his wife had fallen ill, and Lu abandoned her own children for the flood prevention campaign.⁴⁸ The message was unequivocal - selfless dedication to the state was to replace even the most sacred of traditional obligations.



Wang Maoshan



Lu Youzhi

Exemplar narratives were often so outlandish that they bordered on self-parody. This did not stop them from being effective. The Hubei Provincial Archives holds three ledgers containing thousands of hand written commendations for workers who exceeded expectations during the flood prevention campaign.⁴⁹ Far more banal than their published equivalents, these records such as the chef Xu Yiyuan, who not only cooked but also carried earth to repair dykes, or Qiao Shanglin who was praised for her organisational skills and persistence. Even in a time of crisis, the state was monitoring morality of ordinary citizens to an extraordinary extent. What they found was that workers really were exceeding their obligations. On the surface this may seem to indicate that propaganda was genuinely inspirational. A more nuanced reading might suggest that exemplar narratives had provided a script to guide behaviour in accordance with state norms. A retired factory

⁴⁶ Wuhan shi fangxun zong zhihui, *Dang lingdao renmin zhanshengle hongshui*. (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1954), p94.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.95.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p62-63. For similar English language exemplar narratives see Rewi Alley, *Man Against Flood: A Story of the 1954 Flood on the Yangtse and of the Reconstruction That Followed It* (Peking: New World Press, 1956).

⁴⁹ When I visited Hubei Provincial Archives was in the midst of digitization, and these ledgers had yet to be fully catalogued. They are available on request.

worker from Wuhan recalled how members of his work unit genuinely had wished to participate in the flood prevention campaign. They were motivated less by patriotic fervour and revolutionary zeal, and more by a desire to be seen as one of the “activists” (*jiji fenzi*) within the unit. Such a designation was of no little significance. Susan Shirk has characterised Maoist China as a “virtuocratic” society, in which social advancement was based more upon a reputation for political correctness than it was upon any form of occupational competence. In this context, flood prevention might be seen as an instrumental performances used to gain merit.⁵⁰

Not everyone was dedicated to the war against water. Cadres fretted that large crowds of young men were not displaying adequate ideological fervour, choosing to sit around in teahouses rather than participating in flood prevention.⁵¹ Worse still, one local history describes how on July 31st a number of criminal elements (*bufa fenzi*) were arrested in Wuhan for attempting to sabotage the relief effort.⁵² Quite why anyone would indulge in such a grievous act of self-harm is never explained. Later, several city merchants were publicly executed for the crime of “making up rumours to cheat the masses” (*zaoyao huozhong*), having attempted to hoard grain to inflate prices.⁵³ The punishments meted out to such miscreants represented a dark inversion of exemplar narratives. Flood heroes were celebrated for embodying the norms promoted by the new state. Those who resisted or subverted these norms were granted little mercy. The war on water, then, formed part of the broader project to remould citizens in the image of the CCP.

DROWNING THE COUNTRYSIDE

Even with a vast army of workers piling sandbags into breaches and propping-up dykes, the government could not hope to stop the gigantic flood peak traveling down the Yangzi. By the early summer it had become apparent to the governors of Hubei that it was time to launch their ultimate weapon in the war against water. On July 19th the decision was made to open the sluice gates of the Yangzi Flood Diversion at a place named the Palace of King Yu in central Hubei.⁵⁴ The symbolism of this location cannot have been lost upon the local population. The mythic King Yu had establishing dynastic authority by taming a great flood in ancient China. Now the CCP was opening its own sluice gates in order to tame the Yangzi and establish its legitimacy. Unfortunately the huge volumes of water that poured onto the plains were not sufficient to decrease the flood peak. Over the course of the next few months the sluice gates were opened on a further two occasions.⁵⁵

The flood diversion was represented as a great advance in environmental management. Yet in reality it was a defeat dressed up as a victory. The government had created a floodplain before the Yangzi could make its own. When filtered through the CCP propaganda apparatus, however, this capitulation was rewritten as an expression of human dominance over nature. Just as the scrambled retreat of the Long March 1934-1935 came to be seen as defining success for the CCP, so, too, the loss of thousands of *mu* of agricultural land was seen as an inspiring success. In October 1954 the

⁵⁰ Susan L. Shirk, *Competitive Comrades: Career Incentives and Student Strategies in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

⁵¹ ‘Wuhan fangxun zhihuibu — Hanyang qu zhihuibu fangxun gongzuo zongjie baogao.’ September 28, 1954, *Hubei sheng dang’an guan*, Wuhan.

⁵² Pi Mingxiu, *Wuhan tongshi: Zhonghua Remin Gongheguo (shang)*, (Wuhan: Wuhan chubanshe, 2006), p.70.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p.69.

⁵⁴ *Hubei shengzhi: Dashi ji*, p566.

⁵⁵ For a full list of the openings see Pi Mingxiu, *Wuhan tongshi*, p.70.

People's Daily (Renmin Ribao) published an article in which it heaped praise upon rural communities for “voluntarily allowing their villages to be flooded, thereby sacrificing their own wellbeing in order to save the city.” Rural communities had, apparently, realised that “industrial construction is the great life root (*daming genzi*) of the people, and so had to be protected.”⁵⁶ The CCP were not the first to mobilise the rhetoric of sacrifice. Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley has observed that during the war against the Japanese, the Nationalists depicted flood victims as laying down their lives for their country.⁵⁷ What differed in 1954, perhaps, was the extent to which propagandists acted as ventriloquists - depicting state rhetoric supposedly issuing forth from the mouths of the people. Not only had the government destroyed the homes and livelihoods of rural citizens, it now had the temerity to suggest that it had done so with their willing compliance.

In reality the flood diversion had been anything but voluntary. The order to open the sluice gates had been imposed from above. Far from being an unmitigated victory, the flood diversion would exact a horrendous toll upon inundated communities. Reports written by cadres working in the flood diversion zone were couched in the typical political language of the time, replete with political jargon and frequent references to the sage leadership of Mao Zedong. Beneath the surface of these politicised missives it was clear that something was going seriously wrong. The government had constructed the flood diversion but had not prepared an adequate plan to manage its inevitable consequences. Now they were called upon to conduct a rapid evacuation of the affected zone.

Unfortunately many people were extremely reluctant to leave their homes. Such behaviour is by no means unusual. Members of flood-threatened communities from areas as diverse as Mozambique, India and New Orleans have all resisted government evacuation programmes.⁵⁸ Often disparaged as ignorance, such behaviour is usually rooted in an understandable desire to protect property. This basic material concern certainly played a role in the resistance to the evacuation in 1954. At the same time, the behaviour of members of disaster-threatened communities was also influenced by the very particular political context. The early rural policies of the CCP had severed communal bonds and fostered a healthy distrust of the state. This now inhibited disaster governance. Villagers in Jianli County explained that they did not want to evacuate to a safety zone, as to do so would have involved carrying their property out in the open, thereby “exposing their wealth (*loufu*).” The official who reported this behaviour attributed it to “bad elements (*huai fenzi*)” in the village, spreading rumours that the government was planning to use the flood as an excuse to further collectivise property.⁵⁹

Villagers had good reason to be cautious, given the extent to which property had been dispossessed and redistributed by the state in recent years. Their fears were prescient. Over the next few years the state really did appropriate their property and force them to live in communes. Another cadre reported how class taxonomy introduced by the CCP was influencing refugee behaviour. Those

⁵⁶ *Renmin Ribao* 24th October 1954. This exact phrase was also used in ‘Wuhan fangxun zhihuibu.’

⁵⁷ Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, ‘Between War and Water: Farmer, City, and State in China’s Yellow River Flood of 1938–1947’, *Agricultural History*, 90 (2016), 94–116.

⁵⁸ Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development: Cahora Bassa and Its Legacies in Mozambique, 1965–2007* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013), p.170; Andrew Crabtree, ‘The Deep Roots of Nightmares’, in *Cultures and Disasters: Understanding Cultural Framings in Disaster Risk Reduction*, ed. by Fred Krüger and others (London and New York: Routledge, 2015); Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, ‘Pre-Katrina, Post-Katrina’, in *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina*, ed. by Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

⁵⁹ ‘7 Yue xiaxun kuikou fenhong diqu qingkuang’ *HFKDX* pp239-240.

considered middle or rich peasants were reluctant to relocate believing that the government would only provide relief to those designated as poor peasants.⁶⁰ This, again, was not an unreasonable supposition, given the extent to which those with unfavourable class designations had been excluded from earlier government policies.⁶¹ The situation was even worse for the landlords, who were so convinced that no relief would be forthcoming that they simply “surrendered to fate (*tingtian youming*).”

Cadres conducted a propaganda campaign designed to allay such “ideological concerns (*sixiang gulu*).” Yet this did little good. When officials attempted to evacuate a village in Qianjiang the local population shouted abuse at them. Elsewhere villagers were so reluctant to leave that the army resorted to firing guns and artillery into the waste ground surrounding a village, and shouting the names of well-known “bandits” in an attempt to intimidate people into departing.⁶² Even when villagers could be persuaded to leave, the government struggled to maintain order. Cadres in Jianli developed a rigorous methodology in which those with poorly constructed homes in low-standing areas were to be moved first. Priority would be given to the elderly and infirm, and those who had soldiers in their families.⁶³ When they tried to apply this methodology the local villagers fought with each other to get onto the boats first, causing people to drop their precious salvaged property into the water.⁶⁴

The problems did not end with evacuation. Host communities often proved less than welcoming to members of the displaced population.⁶⁵ Reluctance to house refugees is not unusual.⁶⁶ It remains a problem throughout the world today. Once again, however, the attitude taken by the population of Hubei was informed both by a general antipathy towards an influx of outsiders, and also by the specific political context. Cadres in Honghu worried that refugees would diminish production levels whilst villagers feared that their presence of outsiders would spark a second wave of land reform. One local resident reasoned that: “It is OK for refugees to come, but I don’t have much land, I cannot give any away.”⁶⁷ The reluctance of some communities to house outsiders belied the positive image of solidarity of the proletariat and peasants that was promoted in official media reports. Even some citizens of Wuhan grumbled that refugees were not working hard enough in the flood prevention campaign.⁶⁸ If these urban citizens failed to appreciate the sacrifice made by their rural compatriots it was hardly their own fault. Contemporary media reports said nothing of the great misery caused by drowning the countryside, choosing instead to focus upon the miraculous defence of Wuhan. Here too the official story was not all that it appeared.

⁶⁰ ‘Kuikou fenhong qu mei ri qingkuang, Hubei sheng shengchan jiuji weiyuanhui bangongshi, 29th July 1954 *HFKDX*, p.245.

⁶¹ See for example Li Huaiyin, *Village China*, p.29.

⁶² Feng Zhiqiang, ‘Wo jiyi zhong de Jingjiang fenhong gongcheng shouci yunyong, *Wuhan wenshi ziliao*, 7 (2010).

⁶³ ‘7 Yue xiayun kuikou fenhong diqu qingkuang’, pp239-40.

⁶⁴ ‘Kuikou fenhong qu mei ri qingkuang,’ p261.

⁶⁵ ‘Jianli jiangnan zaimin gongzuo baogao,’ *HFKDX*, p353.

⁶⁶ See for example Edgerton-Tarpley, ‘Between War and Water,’ p107.

⁶⁷ ‘Kuikou fenhong qu mei ri qingkuang,’ pp.274-5.

⁶⁸ ‘Wuhan fangxun zhihuibu.’

UNSINKABLE WUHAN

The defence of Wuhan was heralded as the crowning glory of the flood prevention campaign. In 1955 the Hubei Water Conservancy Bureau published a commemorative volume entitled *The Party Leads the People to Victory of the Flood (Dang lingdao renmin zhanshengle hongshui)*.⁶⁹ This was little more than a hagiography. It included features such as photographs of inundated city streets taken in Wuhan in 1931 printed next to their dry equivalents in 1954. It also reproduced a cartoon published during the flood that depicted a mother fish with her spawn set against Hankou's distinctive skyline.



⁶⁹ Wuhan shi fangxun zong zhihibu, *Dang lingdao renmin*.

In the caption below a young fish is saying: “Mummy, didn’t you say that when there was a flood we could go to play in Hankou’s Minzhong Amusement Arcade?” The mother fish replies; “Child, when I went to Minzhong it was during the 1931 flood, that couldn’t happen now”. In such cultural productions, the two floods served as a perfect narrative device, allowing the state to reproduce what the literary historian Gang Yue has described as the “bitter/sweet dichotomy that organized the revolutionary teleology.”⁷⁰ The successful defence of Wuhan was not simply a victory over water but victory over history. It demonstrated the unquestionable superiority of the Communist governors over their Nationalist predecessors.

The absolute contrast between these two systems was a prevalent theme in an English-language book entitled *Man against Flood*, written by Rewi Alley. In the early 1950s the New Zealand expatriate was rapidly becoming one of the leading foreign spokespeople for the Maoist regime. Alley had served as a relief worker in 1931, and claimed to have witnessed a Nationalist regime “so wildly corrupt it permitted graft, speculation and stupid inefficiency to go hand in hand with relief measures.”⁷¹ In 1954, by contrast, “the people of Wuhan worked a miracle.” They protected their city as a key industrial base “so that after the floods had subsided it could give strength unreservedly to reconstruction over the whole area.”⁷² It is difficult to determine whether Alley was being deliberately mendacious or whether he had simply been duped by a carefully stage-managed tour of Wuhan.⁷³ Whichever was the case the heroic victory he described was predicated upon a mistruth.

The city of Wuhan comprised the three historic municipalities of Wuchang, Hankou and Hanyang. Although the former two genuinely had been protected from inundation, Hanyang had suffered several months of serious flooding and a major refugee crisis. The problem was due in a large part to inadequate flood defences. By the early 1950s Hankou and Wuchang both had reinforced concrete dykes, but Hanyang still relied upon older style defences, constructed from tamped earth, clay, and coal slag.⁷⁴ By the late spring of 1954 it had become clear that these crumbling structures could offer little protection against the oncoming deluge. The municipal authorities sent 7,751 workers to bolster the defences, yet by July the supplies of earth had run out. Soon a number of key dyke sections began to collapse. In desperation, engineers directed workers to protect only key industrial sites, including a lumberyard and cotton mill. In doing so, they surrendered vast swathes of residential housing to water. The inundation of Hanyang mirrored the broader dynamic unfolding throughout Hubei. The homes of workers were sacrificed so that the factories that employed them might survive. Around 26,300 residents of Hanyang became refugees as a result.⁷⁵

Claims that the revolution had sweetened the lives of the ordinary population were belied by the intense poverty suffered by large sections of the urban community. Many families continued to reside in simple huts (*pengzi*) constructed from reed matting and other cheap organic materials, just as they had under the Nationalist regime. Erected on marginal land on the littoral fringes of the city, these huts were extremely vulnerable to inundation. One family who had recently arrived from the rural hinterland to work as porters in Hanyang lived in a riverside area of city. When large flood

⁷⁰ Gang Yue, *The Mouth That Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p.168.

⁷¹ Alley, *Man Against Flood*, p11.

⁷² *Ibid*, p.20.

⁷³ For more on Alley, and his complex metamorphosis from educator to propagandist during this period see Brady, *Friend of China*.

⁷⁴ Tao Dinglai, 'Tao Shuzeng yu 1954 nian'.

⁷⁵ 'Kuikou fenhong qu mei ri qingkuang'.

waves began threatening the Dragon Lantern Dyke that protected this area, they were forced to gather their possessions and flee to Turtle Hill. They built themselves a small shelter in an area that had served until recently as a cremation ground for a local Buddhist monastery, and lived for months amidst the charred remains of monks. Similar camps sprang up throughout Hanyang on the archipelago of new islands that had been created by floodwater. Some lived on hillsides, others on dyke tops; dozens of residents of tiny Parrot Island crushed into the classrooms of a local school for the duration of the flood. The experiences of these people are missing from contemporary media reports and subsequent histories, which instead focus upon Hankou and Wuchang—the areas untouched by floodwater that helped create triumphant myth of unsinkable Wuhan.

This was far from the first time that Hanyang had experienced a refugee crisis. During the late-imperial period, those displaced by disasters had relied both upon government granaries and charitable organisations, including guilds, benevolent halls, temples, and native place associations.⁷⁶ In the early twentieth century these traditional organisations had been augmented by the growth of an influential national and international charity sector. Whereas the Nationalists had sought to co-opt the expertise and resources of both traditional and modern institutions, the CCP took a decidedly dim view of private charity, seeing it as a bourgeois obfuscation used as a palliative for class exploitation. Undermining private philanthropy formed part of the broader attack on traditional sources of elite legitimacy, which had begun in earnest with the Five Antis campaign.⁷⁷ The 1954 flood represented one of the first real challenges for the economic infrastructure that the CCP had introduced in order to replace traditional charitable institutions.

The Nationalists had funded the 1931 flood relief effort with hastily issued bonds and costly foreign loans. The CCP was much better placed, being able to utilise a fully nationalised banking sector. The People's Bank of China provided a 300,000 RMB emergency loan to Wuhan alone.⁷⁸ The government also initiated large-scale interregional grain transfers, a policy which echoed that economic interventions made by the Qing state during the golden age of disaster management in the eighteenth century.⁷⁹ Soon emergency aid was arriving in Hubei from as far afield as Guangdong, Henan and Sichuan.⁸⁰ The state grain monopoly may not have been universally popular, and its abuse at the end of the 1950s would be a major cause of famine, yet at this time of crisis it provided an expedient means of organising relief.

Unsurprisingly, official media reports championed the disaster relief campaign as an unqualified success. Shops laden with food in 1954 were juxtaposed with images of starving refugees in 1931.⁸¹ Although clearly a highly partial view of events, those who lived as refugees in Hanyang tended to corroborate this generally positive assessment. The relief effort is remembered as a highly organised and well-provisioned affair—“Chairman Mao was very good,” one now elderly woman recalled, “He didn't let us starve. Every family got steamed bread.” Another former refugees marvelled at how the

⁷⁶ William Rowe, *Hankou: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796-1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

⁷⁷ Nara Dillon, 'New Democracy and the Demise of Private Charity in Shanghai', in *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. by Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p82.

⁷⁸ *Wuhan difangzhi* (Wuhan: Wuhan fangxun zhihuibu bangongshi, 1986), p27.

⁷⁹ Pierre-Étienne Will and R. Bin Wong, *Nourish the People: The State Civilian Granary System in China, 1650 - 1850* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Center for Chinese Studies, 1991).

⁸⁰ Li Qin, '1954 nian Hubei shuizai yu jiuji 1954' *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, 10 (2003).

⁸¹ Wuhan shi fangxun zong zhihuibu, *Dang lingdao renmin*.

government had used airdrops to feed those isolated on hillsides. The picture may not have been quite a rosy as some former refugees recall. Outbreaks of malaria and gastrointestinal diseases took a heavy toll upon refugees in Hanyang.⁸² Refugee recollections were no doubt tinged with degree of nostalgia for the collective era, which older Wuhan residents tend to remember as relatively egalitarian and incorrupt. Yet the universal praise accorded to disaster governance seems to suggest that, in Hanyang at least, state institutions had served as a more than adequate replacement for traditional philanthropy. One former refugee even went so far as to suggest that living on Turtle Mountain was more comfortable than his everyday life as a riverside hut-dweller. At least in the camp he received a daily ration of food. Unfortunately this picture was not replicated in the countryside, where hunger and disease were beginning to take hold.

DEATH IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

The Chinese government has always maintained that the 1954 flood resulted in only a relatively limited loss of life. Contemporary reports offered virtually no descriptions of death, save for a few accounts of exemplars martyred in the war on water. The officially recognised death toll, compiled by State Statistical Bureau, puts the figure at 33,160 fatalities throughout China.⁸³ Although not an inconsiderable loss, this mortality rate was well below the estimates for the 1931 flood, when anywhere between four hundred thousand and two million people died.⁸⁴ Quite how this official death toll was calculated remains a mystery. Yet it has become the standard cited by both local and foreign historians.⁸⁵ There is, however, an alternative set of statistics that offer a very different picture. An internal disaster investigation carried out by the CCP in early 1955 suggests that 149,507 people died in Hubei alone.⁸⁶ The report categorises victims in accordance with their cause and place of death, suggesting that, unlike other statistics, this investigation had a coherent methodology. These statistics are corroborated by another cadre report, which suggests that between July and November 1954 around 132,221 people had died.⁸⁷ These reports suggest that almost five times as many people died in the flood than has been officially acknowledged. Somewhere in the journey between these internal reports and the officially published statistics the lives of well over one hundred thousand people simply disappeared from history.

What really occurred during the flood is obscured by the euphemism and political rhetoric of official reports. The few glimpses that are revealed when this veneer slips, coupled with the insights offered by oral history, provide a valuable insight into the dynamics of a disaster. Famine had historically been one of the most significant problems facing flood-stricken populations in China. Although refugees in Wuhan in 1954 may have marvelled at the generosity of the state, the same could not be said for their rural counterparts. One farmer from Shaomaoshan remembered receiving very little state assistance. Instead his family fell back upon traditional coping strategies, such as eating unripe

⁸² 'Kuikou fenhong qu mei ri qingkuang,' p264; 'Wuhan fangxun zhihuibu'.

⁸³ Zong and Chen, 'The 1998 Flood'.

⁸⁴ For an overview see Chris Courtney <http://www.disasterhistory.org/central-china-flood-1931#METRICS> (accessed 14th July 2016).

⁸⁵ See for example, Kenneth Pomeranz, 'The Transformation of China's Environment 1500-2000', in *The Environment and World History*, ed. by Edmund Burke III and Kenneth Pomeranz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 118–165; Li '1954 nian Hubei shuizai yu jiuji.'

⁸⁶ "Hubei sheng yijiuwusi nian shuizai qingkuang ji zaihou huifu qingkuang tongji," Wuhan: Hubei Provincial Archives, 1954.

⁸⁷ 'Zaiqu qingkuang jianbao' 26th November 1954,' *HFKDX* p.280.

rice and beans salvaged from the flood. When these stocks ran out they relied upon assistance offered by kinship networks. The triumphalist propaganda did not resonate with the experience of those living here. “We were very pitiful (*zaoye*),” he recalled, “I feel very miserable thinking about those times.”⁸⁸

Not all rural areas suffered such profound privation. Cadres in Huangpi were fêted as “Buddhas of salvation (*jiuming pusa*)” after they distributed food and oil to the local population.⁸⁹ Yet even in areas where the state was able to provide relief, there were often still food shortages. Soon rural populations began to display familiar symptoms of economic distress.⁹⁰ Cadres in Honghu County bemoaned the fact that refugees had spent relief funds on begging bowls, seeing this as an expression of their lack of work ethic rather than their desperation.⁹¹ The re-emergence of mendicancy was particularly galling, as the eradication of this practice had been one of the most celebrated victories of the CCP in recent years.⁹² Elsewhere farmers sold their cattle, a desperate act given the vital role these animals played in the pre-mechanised agricultural system. Many people went to great lengths to save their oxen and buffalo from drowning only to find they had no fodder. By the autumn a cadre reported that “evil merchants” were travelling from Hunan to purchase cattle at minimal prices.⁹³ Such exploitative practices had been a mainstay of Chinese disasters for centuries.⁹⁴ It would seem that in spite of the Five Antis campaign, capitalism continued to exist in one of its most rapacious forms.

In spite of the obvious distress caused by the destruction of the main summer harvest, there is little evidence to suggest that Hubei sank into a full blown famine in 1954. The disaster investigation conducted by the party suggested that a mere 69 people had died as the result of exposure and starvation.⁹⁵ Rural communities may have been begging and divesting assets, but they do not appear to have been selling family members, and they certainly did not engage in cannibalism, as some had in past subsistence crises. The official relief campaign no doubt played a role in preventing starvation, yet people from Hubei were formidable flood survivalists. Cadres praised the autonomous actions of farmers, who began to plant and even clear new land even at the height of the flood.⁹⁶ Residents of Hanyang also described how they used buckets to catch the fish that were stranded in pools when the flood receded. Counterintuitive as it may seem, some actually remembered the flood as a time of plenty due to this nutritional windfall.

The absence of famine mortality in the statistics does not necessarily indicate successful alleviation policies. It is possible that investigators may have chosen for political reasons to attribute starvation fatalities to disease, framing famine as a medical emergency as they did in some areas during the

⁸⁸ In the Hubei dialect *zaoye* 造业 (a variant of the Buddhist karmic concept *zaonie* 遭孽) is used in a similar way to the term *kelian* 可怜 standard Mandarin.

⁸⁹ Hubei sheng zaiqing jianbao July 7th 1954, *HFKDX*, pp228-9.

⁹⁰ ‘7 Yue xiaxun kuikou fenhong diqu qingkuang.’

⁹¹ ‘Kuikou fenhong qu mei ri qingkuang.’

⁹² Hanchao Lu, *Street Criers: A Cultural History of Chinese Beggars* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁹³ ‘7 Yue xiaxun kuikou fenhong diqu qingkuang.’

⁹⁴ On disaster profiteering in the eighteenth century see Pierre-Étienne Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine in Eighteenth-Century China*, trans. by Elborg Forster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

⁹⁵ ‘Hubei sheng yijiuwusi nian shuizai qingkuang ji zaihou huifu qingkuang tongji,’ Wuhan: *Hubei sheng dang’an guan*, 1954.

⁹⁶ ‘Hubei sheng zaiqing jiankuang.’

Great Leap famine.⁹⁷ It is also likely that some people may not have had time to starve to death, succumbing to opportunistic infections first. Throughout history, disease has always been the leading cause of flood mortality, far outstripping the threat from drowning or starvation. 1954 was no exception. Disease was the leading proximate cause of death, with dysentery, gastroenteritis and other diarrheal conditions accounting for almost two thirds of all disease fatalities.⁹⁸ Contagious diseases such as measles and influenza were the second most lethal, whilst malaria, a disease that ordinarily thrived during Yangzi floods, accounted for a mere five per cent.⁹⁹ In the aftermath of inundation, haemorrhagic fever and schistosomiasis swept through a population weakened by hunger, exposure, overcrowding and lack of sanitation, helping to raise death rates to fifteen per thousand.¹⁰⁰

Of the approximately ten million people in Hubei affected by the disaster, by far the largest proportion was found in Jingzhou, where flood diversion was located (see Figure 4). This prefecture not only had the largest aggregate population of refugees, but also by far the highest per capita mortality rate (see Figure 5). Jingzhou was home to around forty per cent of flood victims yet suffered almost seventy per cent of all fatalities. We are unlikely to ever know the truth about what went wrong in this prefecture. From the internal report we learn that the three most severely affected counties were Mianyang (25,702 fatalities), Jianli (32,627), and Honghu (21,092). Other areas suffered from mountain flooding, waterlogging or dyke failure, yet it was the three counties in which the government had executed a supposedly controlled flood that had by far the highest rate of mortality.

The government cannot be held entirely responsible for these fatalities. Even had they not opened the sluice gates then around seventy per cent of this region would probably have suffered some form of inundation.¹⁰¹ The diseases that drove mortality were density sensitive, meaning that the per capita mortality rate was bound to be highest in the area with the largest concentration of refugees.

⁹⁷ Compare with Paltemaa, *Managing Famine, Flood, and Earthquake in China*, p33.

⁹⁸ Statistics based on a study of 7898 deceased people from 8 counties. 'Zaiqu qingkuang jianbao' p.280.

⁹⁹ Although 22.8% of deaths were attributed to "other" causes.

¹⁰⁰ Tao Jingliang , 'The Features of the Three Gorges Dam', in *Megaproject: A Case Study of China's Three Gorges Dam*, ed. by Shui-Hung Luk and Joseph Whitney (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1993).

¹⁰¹ 'Hubei sheng zaiqing jiankuang, 6th September 1954, HFKDX p.226.

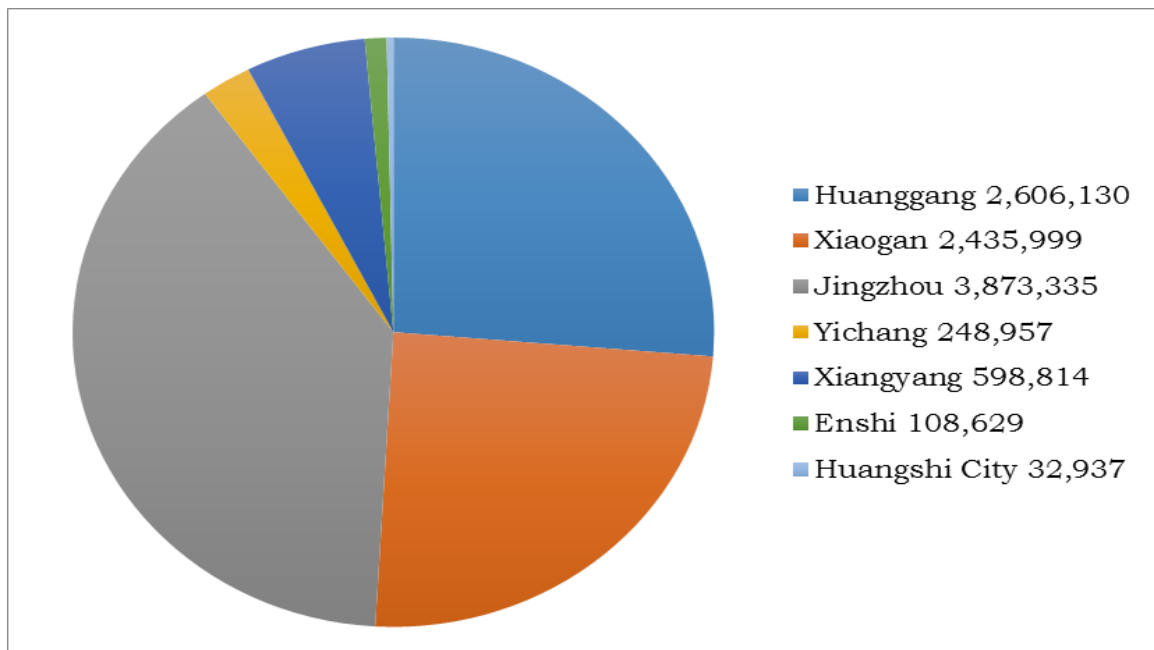


Figure 4. Flood-Affected Population by Prefecture (qu)

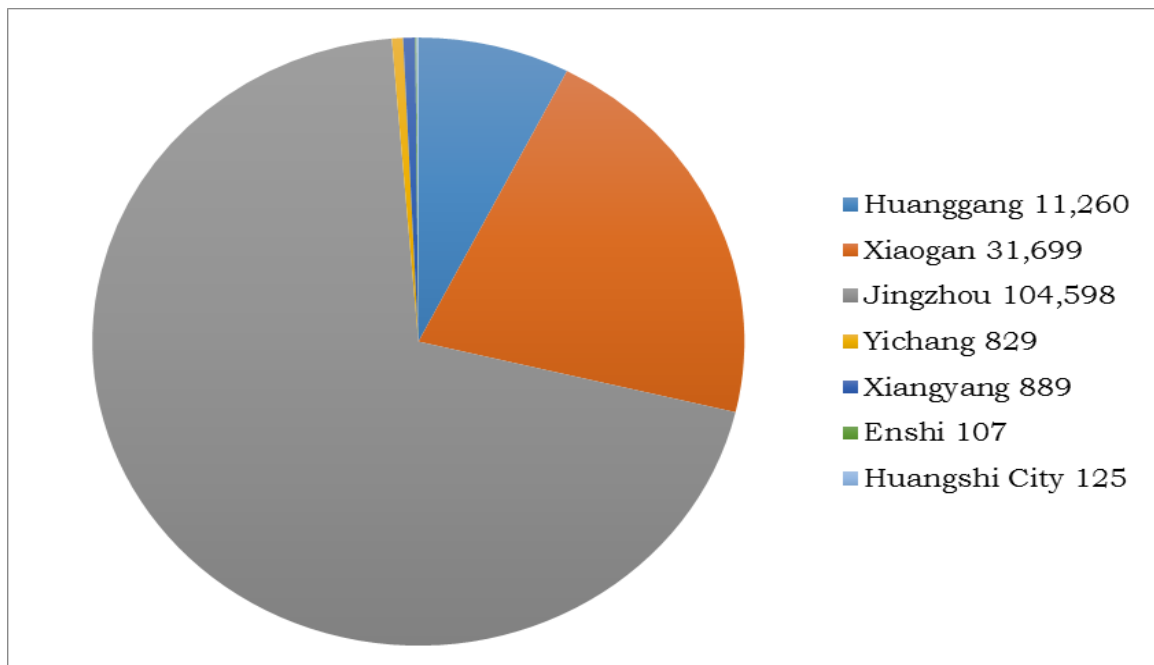


Figure 5. Mortality by Prefecture (qu)¹⁰²

¹⁰² Figures compiled using data from 'Hubei sheng yjiuwusi nian shuizai qingkuang ji zaihou huifu qingkuang tongji'.

Although it is simplistic to talk of epidemics in terms of singular causes, there were clearly some woeful inadequacies in refugee management that helped to create an environment conducive for disease. One report from Honghu County described how displaced people were defecating and urinating freely around their living area. Cadres sought to shift the blame onto supposedly uneducated refugees, yet the fact that even the most basic facilities had not been provided following a planned flood is a bitter indictment of disaster governance.¹⁰³ Whilst propagandists commended the population of the flood zone for sacrificing their homes for the great life root of the city, in reality refugees were abandoned to live in the most abject conditions. Given that this was a planned flood, the failure to provide adequate facilities to evacuate and rehouse refugees is quite incomprehensible. Given this neglect, it is little wonder that an epidemic of suicide soon began to sweep the flood diversion zone. Of the 2,010 people who apparently took their own lives during the disaster in Hubei, some 1,349 were from this area. These desperate people represented yet more unacknowledged casualties in the war on water.

CONCLUSION

The 1954 flood laid bare a brutal irony of the Chinese revolution—a political project that had swept to power by mobilising millions of rural citizens chose repeatedly to sacrifice the countryside in order to develop the city. Some of the communities that were flooded deliberately during the disaster had been loyal supporters of the CCP since as early as the 1920s, providing assistance to guerrilla forces fighting against the Nationalists and Japanese.¹⁰⁴ The loyalty of one such community was so renowned that it was celebrated in a 1961 motion picture entitled *The Red Guards on Honghu Lake (Honghu chiwei dui)*.¹⁰⁵ When disaster threatened this loyalty counted for very little, as the sluice gates were opened on Honghu. This deliberate flooding was an extreme example of the kind of urban bias that the historian Jeremy Brown has described throughout the Maoist era. Policies that aimed ostensibly to eliminate distinctions between the countryside and the city actually sharpened the divide. This was most evident during the mass starvation of the Great Leap famine, yet could also be discerned when millions of urban youths were dumped on the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁰⁶

The Maoist state is not the only polity in history to have sacrificed rural lives to rivers. The most obvious comparison in the modern era is with the Nationalists, whose generals deliberately breached the Yellow River dykes in 1938 in a desperate attempt to slow the Japanese advance.¹⁰⁷ During the years of flooding that followed, local Nationalist administrations had often funnelled water into the countryside in order to protect cities such as Zhoujiakou or Fuyang.¹⁰⁸ Qing commanders adopted a similar approach in 1856, using the Juzhang River as a weapon against its

¹⁰³ Kuikou fenhong qu mei ri qingkuang,' p263.

¹⁰⁴ Gregor Benton, *New Fourth Army: Communist Resistance Along the Yangtze and the Huai, 1938-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), particularly p.38.

¹⁰⁵ See *Hong hu chi wei dui : ge ju* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1978).

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *City Versus Countryside*. The CCP sacrificed the countryside once again during floods in 1963. See Paltemaa, *Managing Famine, Flood, and Earthquake*.

¹⁰⁷ Micah Muscolino, *The Ecology of War in China Henan Province, the Yellow River, and Beyond, 1938–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁰⁸ Edgerton-Tarpley, 'Between War and Water.'

Taiping enemies.¹⁰⁹ Looking beyond China, the United States Army Corps of Engineers blew up levees in 1927, unleashing the Mississippi onto rural districts in order to protect New Orleans.¹¹⁰

The 1954 flood diversion was not, then, a peculiar pathology of Maoist ideology. Neither was it morally indefensible. Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley has described the Nationalist decision to divert water away from more defensible areas in 1938 as a “pragmatic response to a terrible situation.”¹¹¹ The same could be said of 1954. We need look no further than the 1931 flood to see how much more profound the humanitarian consequences to Hubei could have been if Wuhan was inundated. Not only would millions more citizens have been inundated, but the province would have lost its economic centre. The engineers who opened the sluice gates were neither heroes nor villains. Their decisions can be explained neither by the hagiographic official accounts of the flood nor by the demonographic tendencies that have sometimes crept into the historiography of the Maoist China. This was a complex zero-sum calculation, not best served by a view of history in which the Maoist period is seen simply as a political cautionary tale.

Hubei would have flooded in 1954 no matter which political party was at the helm. Whether the humanitarian consequences would have been the same is a different question. The CCP seems to have managed some aspects of the relief effort relatively well, particularly by taking advantage of increased state control of labour, finances, and grain. Contrary to the view of historians who feel we must apply a totalising logic when analysing the Maoist economic system, the experience of the 1950s reveals that the collective economy was good at some things and bad at others. One area where it seemed to thrive was in distributing resources during relief campaigns. The generally positive memories of refugees in Hanyang were hardly exceptional. Members of communities that experienced the Wei River Floods in Henan in 1956 and the Hai River Floods in Hebei in 1963 also spoke highly of government relief efforts.¹¹² This relative efficiency in the wake of genuine hazards renders the mass starvation of the late-1950s even more incomprehensible. During these so-called Three Years of Natural Disasters, a government that had learnt to deal relatively well with acute subsistence crises fell back on the oldest excuse in the book—blaming their economic mismanagement upon the weather.

If the state was able to organise effective relief then why did so many people perish in central Hubei in 1954? The answers are more political than economic. They involved both the micropolitics of the village, where distrustful farmers felt that they were going to be duped out of the land, and the macropolitics of hydraulic governance, with engineers giving insufficient thought to the collateral damage caused by their war on water. Each of these spheres speaks to a political system that, as Yang Jisheng has argued, lacked any effective feedback mechanism between society and state.¹¹³ This ensured that none of the lessons of the flood were enshrined within disaster governance.

¹⁰⁹ Yan Gao, *Transformation of the Water Regime: State, Society and Ecology of the Jiangnan Plain in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Unpublished Thesis. Carnegie Mellon University, 2012).

¹¹⁰ Pete Daniel, *Deep'n as it Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1977), pp.72-73.

¹¹¹ Edgerton-Tarpley, 'Between War and Water.' The logic behind this practice did not stop the CCP from criticising the Nationalists for their callous disregard for rural lives, a line of argument the party seems to have forgotten by 1954.

¹¹² Ralph Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.104-106; Lillian M. Li, *Fighting Famine in North China: State, Market, and Environmental Decline, 1690s-1990s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p.367.

¹¹³ Yang, *Tombstone*.

Rather than subjecting itself to the kind of rigorous self-criticism (*ziwo pipan*) that it so often prescribed to political miscreants, the party-state instead manufactured a myth of victory. This not only wiped thousands of lives from the historical record, but also precluded any chance that the flood might inspire the kind of “fundamental learning” that the historian Christian Pfister has identified as key to addressing the ultimate causes of disasters.¹¹⁴

In subsequent years, rather than seeking to accommodate the entirely predictable high stream flow events the government has instead continued to do battle with the Yangzi. This was displayed most vividly by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. The government had wanted to erect this huge wall of concrete in western Hubei in the early 1950s, yet, lacking the infrastructural capacity, had contented themselves temporarily with constructing the Yangzi Flood Diversion.¹¹⁵ When the CCP finally achieved its hydraulic ambitions, which had been shared by every leader of China since Sun Yat-sen, they celebrated what seemed to be an unprecedented victory over nature.¹¹⁶ The fact that, once again, millions of people had to be displaced in order for this project to be completed was of little concern.¹¹⁷ Unfortunately, the triumphalist propaganda that accompanied the completion of this monumental weapon in the war on water proved hollow. During the summer of 2016 much of Hubei, including Wuhan, was inundated with floodwater. It would seem that residents of this long disaster-prone region are condemned to suffer flooding every time the Yangzi forgets that it has been vanquished.

¹¹⁴ Christian Pfister, 'Learning from Nature-Induced Disasters Theoretical Considerations and Case Studies from Western Europe', in *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses Case Studies Toward a Global Environmental History*, ed. by Christof Mauch and Christian Pfister (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 17-40.

¹¹⁵ Di, 'Xin Zhongguo'.

¹¹⁶ Yin, *Long Quest*.

¹¹⁷ Bryan Tilt, *Dams and Development in China: The Moral Economy of Water and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p.146.



Soldier Rescuing Children at the Beichuan Earthquake Museum¹¹⁸

If contemporary hydraulic policies still betray a legacy of Maoism, so too does the representation of disasters. The government continues to present natural hazards as if they were enemy combatants. This was witnessed most recently during the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake. The state media showed continuous reports of soldiers—the symbolic descendants of the exemplars venerated in 1954—tirelessly digging victims out of the rubble.¹¹⁹ Perhaps the greatest expression of the militarisation of disasters occurred when the army used rocket launchers to clear a lake formed by a landslide during the earthquake.¹²⁰ Once again official media outlets highlighted militarism and volunteerism in order to obscure the less palatable aspects of the disaster. Yet as the state no longer enjoyed monopoly control over the dissemination of information, soon there was a public outcry about the thousands of children had been killed when their poorly built “tofu dreg” schools collapsed.¹²¹ Rather than memorialising these casualties, the CCP instead chose to build the Beichuan Earthquake Museum near the site of the school. Like those perusing the flood monument on the banks of the Yangzi in Wuhan who remain oblivious to the hidden victims of the inundation, visitors to Beichuan are not encouraged to linger on the memory of dead children, but instead to marvel at a heroic state that continuous to wage war on nature.

¹¹⁸ Photograph by the author.

¹¹⁹ See Paltemaa, *Managing Famine, Flood, and Earthquake in China*, pp.184-192.

¹²⁰ Photographs of this event can be witnessed at the Beichuan Earthquake Museum.

¹²¹ John David Ebert, *The Age of Catastrophe: Disaster and Humanity in Modern Times* (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, 2012), p.150.