

The River, the Plain, and the State: An Environmental Drama in Northern Song China, 1048–1128

By Ling Zhang. *Studies in Environment and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. 328. ISBN 10: 1107155983; ISBN 13: 978-1107155985.

Takatoshi Endo and Translated by Masaki Taniguchi

Kochi University, Email: endou@kochi-u.ac.jp

In 1048, during the mid-Song period of China, the Yellow River breached its banks at its lower reaches, and instead of running east, it shifted its course northwards across the Hebei plain and sought a path out to the Bohai Sea. This stream is known in general as the Shang Hu River. For eighty years thereafter the Yellow River continually devastated Hebei, forcing the Song dynasty to keep dealing with the problem. Later, in 1128, a general of the Southern Song dynasty destroyed the banks of the Yellow River, forcing its direction to change again, but this time towards the south, feeding into the Huai River and then entering the Yellow Sea. *The River, the Plain, and the State* is an extremely innovative and ambitious study which examines multilaterally and integrally the dramatic history of the eighty years from 1048 to 1128 from the viewpoint of the hydraulic projects and environment of the Yellow River, the regional society of Hebei, and the politics and economy of the Song dynasty.

The author proposes the following key concepts that underlie this study's analysis and discussion. The first is the "Yellow River-Hebei Environmental Complex"; the second is the "hydraulic mode of consumption"; and the third is the "core-periphery structure."

The first concept is a device for the integral examination of the natural and the human history of the Yellow River and Hebei. This book succeeds in discussing the two by connecting them dynamically. According to this study, the Yellow River was originally a pure and clear stream, but agricultural development and the environmental change of the Loess Plateau made it yellow and muddy around the period of the Han dynasty, which became one of the causes of the floods. In addition, the Yellow River's change of flow to the north during the Song dynasty was not only due to the change in natural environment but was also caused by the dynasty's manipulation of policies intended to protect the capital, Kaifeng, and the He-nan area where it was located from Yellow River floods. As a result, Hebei was sacrificed by the empire. The floods covered its farmland with a large amount of muddy soil containing salt, and turned it into barren land with low productivity.

The second concept is a discussion that modifies Karl Wittfogel's famous theory of the "hydraulic mode of production". That is to say, it argues that Chinese dynasties did not enhance their productivity and enlarge and develop their empires by means of hydraulic projects and irrigation, but rather that the empires exhausted their resources and got into difficult situations because of their investment in hydraulic projects. In fact, the Song dynasty invested not only in flood control but also in politics, the economy, finance, military, labor and all kinds of resources for Hebei when it was unable to maintain its society and economy due to the floods. However, this effort ended in failure, and the empire was troubled by the heavy burden of Hebei. The author names this the "hydraulic mode of consumption," and presents a new viewpoint on the relationship between Chinese dynasties and hydraulic projects.

The third concept, the "core-periphery structure," is a device for analyzing the status and placement of Hebei within the empire. Hebei used to play major political and military roles in the empire, but during the Song dynasty it was gradually deprived of its status and came to be under the empire's direct control. Nonetheless, Hebei was still recognized as the hub of national defense against the Khitan to the north, and considered the "root of All-Under-Heaven." Although Hebei was such an important place, its people and towns were destroyed by the northward shift of the Yellow River. Its politics, agriculture and economy declined. At last it was pushed aside to the margins of the empire,

and became the hub of disasters. The author makes a clear analysis of this ironic dual feature of Hebei from the viewpoint of the “core-periphery structure” concept.

This study thus examines the hydraulic practices of the Yellow River and the natural environment of Hebei on the one hand and the politics, society and economy of the Song dynasty on the other, not separately or individually but integrally by relating one with the other. Past studies on the Yellow River mainly focused on the transition of river channels, flood control projects, and hydraulic technology. Not many studies analyzed it from the viewpoint of the natural environment. Much less, very few studies have discussed both the natural environment and human history in relation to each other in an integrated way. In that sense, this study is academically extremely significant, and will be a benchmark publication for future studies of Chinese history.

Moreover, according to the author, the analysis in this study is the first model that can be applied not only to the history of one dynasty in one small area over such a short span of time as 1048 to 1128, but to all the later Chinese empires that lasted for a thousand years after that, and it is a theme still relevant to the hydraulic projects and environmental issues of modern China. This awareness is based on a large-scale argument with perspectives examining the long history of China, expected to influence not only the theory of Chinese dynasties’ hydraulic ideology but also the classification of historical periods of China, such as the Tang–Song transition and the Song–Yuan–Ming transition, and hence the theories of Chinese history.

There are few historical records on the northern area of the Song dynasty, and therefore studies on this area lag far behind those of the southern area. To remedy this situation, the current study has succeeded in describing the history of the Hebei region in great detail, by referring to the compiled records, statistical data, essays and anthologies written by bureaucrats and scholar-officials, and other resources from the Song dynasty. In this respect, too, this book has made a profound contribution to the study of history.

However, the concept of “core-periphery” is somewhat questionable. This is because China and East Asia of the tenth–twelfth centuries consisted of two juxtaposing political hubs, i.e., the Liao dynasty and the Song dynasty. It was not simply dominated by the “core-periphery” structure of the Song dynasty alone. East Asia in those days had an oval-shaped structure with two centers in it, and Hebei was situated right at the heart of the oval. The “root of All-Under-Heaven,” as it was called by the people of the Song dynasty, referred to Hebei being located in the middle of this oval world formed by the Liao and Song dynasties. The dual feature of Hebei pointed out in this study also derives largely from this oval structure.¹

In addition, the maps of the Yellow River and Hebei provided in this study may be rather too simplified or conceptualized. As this study shows, the Yellow River consisted of not just one but several streams running north during the period from 1048 to 1128. It may not be necessary to show all of them, but it is essential to include the main ones on the maps. Maps are essential because they can provide details of the regional characteristics of Hebei, especially some evidence to show which areas of Hebei were more damaged than others.²

Nevertheless, this study is an outstanding masterpiece, which makes a dynamic, fair and precise analysis of the eighty-year complex history of the Yellow River and Hebei. In this review I have been able to introduce only a fraction of this work, so I would like to leave the rest up to the reader. I hope the author will further advance her studies in the future.

doi:10.1017/S1479591420000042

¹Endo Takatoshi, *Hokusō jidai no koga chisui rōgi* (“The Discussion for the Control of the Yellow River in Northern Song China; Special Reference to the Formation of the Shang-hu River”), *Journal of Historical Research, Kainan Shigaku* 37 (1999), pp. 1–25. Endo Takatoshi, “*Ka goku*”; *Sōdai Chūgoku no chisui to tōsō*, (“The Yellow River Scandal; The Embankment Works and the Party Strife during Song China”), *Bulletin of the Faculty of Education, Kochi University* 62 (2002), pp. 37–51.

²Cen Zhongmian, *Huanghe bianqian shi* (“The History of Yellow River Transition”) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1957). Miyazaki Ichisada, *Ō Ansei no kōga chisui saku* (“Wang Anshi’s Hydraulic Project of Yellow River”), *Miyazaki Ichisada zenshū* (“The Complete Works of Miyazaki Ichisada”), vol. 10 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1992).