

BOOK REVIEW

Cutting the Mass Line: Water, Politics, and Climate in Southwest China

Andrea E. Pia. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024.
xxii + 340 pp. \$49.95 (pbk). ISBN 9781421448848

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Andrea E. Pia's *Cutting the Mass Line* is about water and water politics in Huize County, northeast Yunnan. It combines superb reporting and narration – from fieldwork spanning a decade – with myriad explanations and theorizations of what went on, some of which provide fascinating and provocative insights, and some of which simply display the author's erudition.

Pia has organized his chapters around an extended conceit of waterlines: "Timelines" is about how local water bureaucrats situate themselves in linear visions of past and future. "Gridlines" is about ditches, mains and pipes, and how water managers and water users jockey to control and obtain access to water. "Lifelines" is about how water managers use emergency measures that bring water to under-provisioned communities but thereby impede long-term solutions to water scarcity. "Seams" is about the ways in which "changing waters affect the ways people think about the present and future of a place." And "Cracks," perhaps the most interesting chapter, is about how local communities exploit leaks and breaches, both in physical channels and pipes and in bureaucratic structures, to create local distribution systems that they (and the author) deem more just.

Cutting the Mass Line can be read in many ways: as a "follow the..." ethnography of water, as an ethnography of a water-stressed community, as an ethnography of a remote community in China's age of rural depopulation, as a manifesto of ideas from Italian water activists (among whom the author counts himself), and as a test run for a multi-dimensional matrix of collective action theories. A reader interested in any of these angles will find much stimulation here. But a writer of a short review must choose, and here I concentrate on five.

The most *necessary* way to read *Cutting the Mass Line* is as a critique of the stereotype of corrupt local officials that has long prevailed in both scholarship and journalism about rural China. Pia shows how staffers of the Water Services Office in pseudonymous Yancong Township are tugged in three directions: toward the dictates of modernist, top-down, "scientific" management policies formulated by higher-ranking bureaucrats; toward the staffers' own career prospects; and toward local communities' demands for secure and just access to scarce water. Rather than simplistically laying the blame on the beleaguered bureaucrats, Pia describes creative ways in which they manoeuvre in this environment, improvising short-term patches such as delivering truckloads of water to dry villages or waiving fees for the poorest households, but thereby taking up a big chunk of their resources and preventing long-term solutions to systemic shortages.

The most *conventional* (but still pertinent) way to read the book is as a critique of certain capitalist processes: enclosure and commodification of substances like water (and tangentially also land) that were once unquantifiable means of livelihood but have been transformed into things to which people have quantifiable, adjudicable rights that can be traded in money. But Pia shows that this recasting of water is never complete, because local users and managing bureaucrats both realize that, as the activists of Standing Rock so effectively proclaimed, *mni wiconi*, "water is life."

The most *intriguing* way to read *Cutting* is as a case study of Elinor Ostrom's ideas, not only as a framework of analysis (Clifford Geertz's "model of"), but also as a framework for action (Geertz's "model for"). One learns, surprisingly, that Ostrom's analysis of the governance of common-pool resources ("the commons"), translated into Chinese, has shaped the thinking of water scholars, policymakers and managers at all levels, even if the systems they devise fall short of fulfilling all her principles for common resource management. Pia also invokes Ostrom in his own analysis, describing ways in which local community leaders "commonize" resources that state policies have recently commodified. In a series of lively narratives, Pia describes how both Han and Yi communities invoke older traditions of customary law to solve disputes by prescribing restoration, rather than punishment, for perceived breaches of community norms of fair water allocation.

The most *significant* way to read the book is as a critique of techno-modernist approaches to resource and livelihood problems. The state in recent times has continually rationalized water control and distribution at all levels, from the 27km³/year flowing through the South–North Water Transfer Project and the 22-gigawatt Sanxia dam down to concrete-lined channels and metered water charges for local agricultural producers and household consumers in Huize villages. But there are still shortages in Huize, as there are regional droughts at various times, and floods happen every year. Local people realize this, and react by creatively re-engineering pipes and ditches or, as in the anecdote that opens the book, sabotaging water-grabbing ventures of commercial flower and fish growers. But at the same time, water planners and local bureaucrats invoke the civilizational myth of Great Yu Governing the Waters (*Da Yu zhi shui*) and persist with their top-down governance, thus ensuring that "There [will be] policies above and countermeasures below" (*shang you zhengce, xia you duice*).

But the most *profound* way to read the book is as an argument against environmental-political nihilism or as a qualified manifesto of hope. In his conclusion, moving away from the over-theorization and overlong sentences that sometimes chafe in the earlier chapters, Pia sums up his findings in a series of eloquent statements, which I cannot improve on, and thus quote here:

From the point of view of ethnographic studies of the state, the commons, and of grassroots resource management, *Cutting the Mass Line* offers a word of caution about the often-uncritical hostility this literature displays toward the state. (p. 213)

What if we shifted focus away from what resistance and sustainability fail to accomplish in ordinary people's lives to what these could potentially mean for them? (p. 208)

Fragmentation is a generative political space replete with opportunities for the country's underprivileged. (p. 214)

Together, dispossessed residents and compromised experts envisioned rules, canal systems, and regimes of reparation and political accountability that were designed to keep fresh water available regardless of gluts or dearth, and its distribution *just*. (p. 209, emphasis in original)

Cutting the Mass Line is sometimes difficult; a reader encounters the verbal equivalents of rapids, stagnant pools, dry ditches, maybe algal blooms. But as the waters of Yancong nourish the land and its inhabitants, the book nourishes our understanding of how people live in a world of nature, scarcity, regulation and getting by.