

*The Yellow River: The Problem of Water in Modern China*

DAVID A. PIETZ

Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2015

xi + 367 pp. £29.95

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*Dams and Development in China: The Moral Economy of Water and Power*

BRYAN TILT

New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014

xv + 259 pp. \$90.00; £62.00

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These books reaffirm the nature of water as a long-standing crucial issue in China although the authors approach the matter in different ways and in different regions – hence producing different perspectives. Pietz’s book takes a comprehensive historical approach to understanding the transformation of the Yellow River valley with emphasis on policy, whereas Tilt’s work is largely a socio-anthropological attempt to find a way to employ what he calls the “moral economy” in the development of hydropower dams. Tilt does this through a study over the last two decades of the experiences of dam building in western Yunnan along the Nu River and the Lancang River. The books overlap in some historical references and together, give the reader a good view of historical and contemporary environmental and social difficulties of having powerful outside bureaucratic/economic forces dictating the future of local peoples. They also complement each other by dealing with regions with distinct ethnic histories although the periods emphasized differ.

Pietz takes a comprehensive approach to try to explain the history and geography before focusing on the Yellow (Huang) River valley. We are introduced to the story of Yu the Great and the flood myths as well as early efforts at hydraulic control in China. From the Yuan period, Pietz starts to detail problems of silt control on the Huang and the Huai as well as along the Grand Canal. He reiterates the well-known fact that environmental breakdown on the North China Plain was already apparent in the 19th century and worsened during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Europeans and North Americans became interested in solving these problems from the late 19th century, but their theories, like the Soviets later, were not adequate to deal with such a silt-laden river system. I found the contribution of Japanese war-time plans for the Yellow River, as well as his notes on the Nationalist-Communist rivalry leading to a lack of cooperation on river efforts in the second half of the 1940s, to be a unique contribution.

Subsequent post-war Communist efforts were framed within references to “resist America” propaganda. Pietz notes the belief of the time that Soviet science was going to be capable of controlling the river valley as never before. He devotes considerable effort to the story of the failure of the Sanmenxia (Three Gate Gorge) Dam while he points out that Maoists, at times, had some success with small-scale projects on the North China Plain. As I read this section I kept thinking about Lester Ross’s ideas of environment policy of a bureaucratic approach versus a campaign approach as very apt to describe the differences in the Soviet methods and the Maoist campaign methods that Pietz outlines for the failures of irrigation districts.

Pietz continues with a discussion of the film *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*) and *River Elegy* (*He shang*) as social critiques that made use of the Yellow River and its

landscape changes as imagery for failed Maoist policies and other social ills of the past. Then, in a somewhat incongruous manner, the discussion moves into modern China of the 1990s and 2000s covering the stories of big projects, Huai River pollution and other topics already well-discussed in the contemporary literature.

As with the Yellow River, the more recent human modifications of the Nu and Lancang Rivers have been discussed in detail in the literature over their much shorter period of development. Tilt does a very good job of pulling this material together putting emphasis on socio-economic development. He contrasts the well-developed project management of the Lancang with the less developed Nu River. Although Tilt does not go into it in large detail, the damming of these rivers is more problematic than the Yellow River because of their international nature. At the end of each book there is some discussion of China's involvement in international hydrological projects.

When talking about the southwest I find it interesting that Tilt shows that 'winning' and 'losing' is not always so clear as it might be on the Yellow River, or in the Three Gorges case. Some of the resettled peoples in the southwest seemed to be satisfied with their new arrangement. As would be expected, those living in the most remote parts of Yunnan were less likely to understand what the negative consequences of dam construction might be for them personally and had little to lose materially in many cases. The issue in Yunnan is also complicated by the national minorities question with poor, isolated ethnic minorities being the ones displaced and resettled. Tilt wrote that space for non-governmental organizations to work in China is opening but alas this point seems to be becoming more contentious. Both authors are concerned for the future. However, as Tilt is using a more social science-oriented contemporary approach, it feels more natural for his book to conclude with China's overseas dam building.

Thus these books complement each in one sense but as teaching tools the overlap is less than one might think. *Yellow River* is a good overview for one interested in the historical development of rivers in the North China heartland. In contrast, Tilt's is a good book for a course related to cultural geography and anthropological themes of development with more of an international flavour. For the student of China and specialist not specifically focused on hydrological projects there is much to learn from both.

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*Party Hegemony and Entrepreneurial Power in China: Institutional Change in the Film and Music Industries*

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xxi + 262. £90.00

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Originating as a PhD thesis at the University of Tübingen, Meyer-Clement's volume examines how the processes of marketization and commercialization affect the stability of the regime, addressing in particular the role that Communist Party (CCP) leadership plays in shaping marketization and in adapting regime policy to counter any perceived threats to its rule. More specifically, she builds on previous studies of