

FROM “NOURISH THE PEOPLE” TO “SACRIFICE FOR THE NATION”: CHANGING RESPONSES
TO DISASTER IN LATE IMPERIAL AND MODERN CHINA

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Note to Readers: In this paper I draw on research conducted for *Tears from Iron*, my book on the North China Famine of 1876-79, as well as my new research on the Yellow River flood of 1938-47, to map changes and continuities in Chinese responses to disaster. The paper is part of a larger project that seeks to trace ways in which Chinese interpretations of disaster changed due to the dramatic political and cultural shifts experienced between China’s late-Qing (1800-1912), Republican (1912-49), and Mao (1949-76) periods. I hope that the colloquium itself can lead to a broader conversation about shifting conceptualizations of and responses to disaster under modernizing states.

Stated Yu: “The inundating waters seemed to assail the heavens, and in their vast extent embraced the mountains and overtopped the hills, so that people were bewildered and overwhelmed. I mounted my four conveyances, and all along the hills hewed down the woods, . . . I (also) opened the passages for the streams throughout the nine (provinces), and conducted them to the four seas. I deepened (moreover) the channels and canals, and conducted them to the streams, at the same time along with Ji sowing grain, and showing the multitudes how to procure the food of toil . . . In this way all the people got grain to eat, and all the States began to come under good rule.”¹

“With two days and nights of concerted effort from the second and third regiments of our division, . . . we succeeded in releasing the water before 8 o’clock in the morning as planned. . . . At the beginning it flowed slowly, but at 1pm, a flood suddenly rushed out like ten thousand horses galloping forth. . . . Looking ahead was a vast expanse of water; from the west to the north of Jingshui town all became submerged. It is expected that within a few days [water] will spread to many counties in this area, which grieves the heart. But this action was taken only to hold back the enemy and save the overall situation. For this reason [we] did not hesitate to make this great sacrifice in order to strive for the final victory.”²

INTRODUCTION:

In June 1938, the leaders of China’s beleaguered Nationalist government ordered soldiers to breach a major Yellow River dike in a desperate attempt to “use water in place of soldiers” (*yishui daibing*) to slow the advance of the Japanese Imperial Army. The breach caused the Yellow River to

¹ *The Classic of History (Shang Shu)*, in *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. 3. James Legge, trans. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1865, reprint 1960), 77-78.

² The Number Two Historical Archives of China, “1938 nian Huanghe jue di shiliao yizhu: Xiong Xianyu rijixuan” [Historical materials on the Yellow River breach of 1938, group 1: Selections from Xiong Xianyu’s diary], in *Minguo dang’an* [Republican archives] 49 (1997, number 3): 10-11.

undergo a major change in course that led to catastrophic flooding in three provinces, and kept nearly two million acres of good farmland out of dependable production from 1938 until 1947.³ The flood, as well as the famine conditions and epidemics that resulted from it, created close to four million refugees and killed as many as 900,000 people. Although the Chinese government made attempts to repair the breach, the chaos of war kept this goal out of reach until 1947. Because the river's new course took it through areas unprotected by dikes, those areas experienced flooding and famine conditions not only in 1938, but almost every summer for the next eight years.⁴

As a historian of Qing China who spent the past decade immersed in famine texts from the most severe famine in imperial China's history, the North China Famine of 1876-79, the 1938 flood is intriguing to me because it appears to introduce a Chinese state willing to break with the longstanding conviction that the foremost responsibility of a benevolent government is to nourish the people (*yangmin*) and control the waters (*zhishui*). The decision to breach dikes for strategic reasons was not new in and of itself. Mark Elvin, for instance, argues that the very technology necessary for constructing the huge embankments that kept the Yellow River in its place originated in part from the walls that combatants in the Warring States period (481-221 BCE) built to both defend state borders and "direct floodwaters across the territories of their enemies."⁵ Recent Chinese publications about the 1938 breach refer to an example of strategic flooding made famous by *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a Ming novel about the martial exploits of historical figures who vied for power as the Han dynasty crumbled. In the novel Guan Yu uses flooding to defeat, albeit temporarily, Cao Cao's forces at Fancheng in 219 CE.⁶ Another major

³ O.J. Todd, "The Yellow River Reharnessed." *Geographical Review* 39.1 (1949): 39-45.

⁴ Li Wenhui, Cheng Xiao, Liu Yangdong, and Xia Mingfang, eds., "Renhuo tianzai 1938 nian de Huayuankou juekou shijian" [A man-made natural disaster: the Huayuankou breach event of 1938], in *Zhongguo jindai shi da zaihuang* [The ten great famines of China's modern period] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1994): 249-54.

⁵ Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 24-25.

⁶ For example, see Huang Duowu, "Kangri zhangzheng zhong Huanghe juekou qinli ji" [Record of (my) personal experience of the Yellow River breach during the Anti-Japanese War], *Jiangsu wenshi ziliao xuanji* [Anthology of Jiangsu literary and historical materials] 2 (1981): 75; Luo Guanzhong, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, vol. 2, trans. C.H. Brewitt-Taylor. (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1959), 154. As is so often

strategic breach occurred in 1128, when Northern Song (960-1127) officials decided to breach the Yellow River 80 kilometers north of Kaifeng, their capital, in an unsuccessful attempt to use flooding to fend off the Jurchen Jin (1115-1234) armies that were rapidly conquering the North.⁷ The Ming government (1368-1644) also breached dikes of the Yellow River in an equally futile effort to stop anti-Ming rebels in the last years of the dynasty.⁸ One might think that this litany of unsuccessful attempts to use strategic flooding to preserve a dynasty might have given the Nationalist high command pause (if they were aware of these examples), but that seems not to have been the case.

While the use of water as an instrument of warfare was not new in 1938, the way that the Nationalist state discussed and responded to the flood points to important shifts in Chinese interpretations of disaster. Throughout the flood, leading pro-Guomindang newspapers and Nationalist officials generally depicted the disaster as an example of national sacrifice and as a “technical problem that modern social and natural science will eventually resolve.”⁹ This was a sharp departure from the long-held Confucian view, which dates back to the Chinese Classics, that floods and other disasters were Heaven’s way of warning the ruler that he had offended Heaven by failing to act as a benevolent father and mother of the people, and should change course or risk losing the mandate to rule. After the war Chinese Communist officials and newspapers charged that the Nationalists had relied on a cruel and hopelessly outdated form of warfare in their attempt to use water in place of soldiers against the Japanese. Ironically, though, the Communist claim that harnessing the power of the masses was the best way to defend China is in many ways reminiscent of older, Confucian ideas about the role of the state during times of disaster.

the case with strategic flooding, Guan Yu’s gains at Fancheng were only temporary. He lost the battle after the floodwaters receded, and was eventually captured and executed.

⁷ Christian Lamouroux, “From the Yellow River to the Huai: New Representations of a River Network and the Hydraulic Crisis of 1128,” in *Sediments of Time: Environment and Society in Chinese History*, ed. Mark Elvin and Liu Ts’ui-jung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 545-46. As was the case in 1938, the 1128 breach forced the Yellow River to shift southward and join the Huai River, thus causing catastrophic flooding.

⁸ Elvin, *Retreat of Elephants*, 139.

⁹ Jenny Edkins, *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xv.

CONTROLLING THE WATERS; NOURISHING THE PEOPLE

In ancient and imperial China, controlling China's rivers and feeding the country's large population were key ways for a ruler to demonstrate his moral legitimacy and win the people's hearts. The Great Yu, for instance, the legendary sage emperor said to be the founder of the Xia Dynasty (roughly 2070 – 1600 BCE), demonstrated his fitness to rule by taming China's rivers when others had failed.¹⁰ The account of Yu's deeds recorded in the *Classic of History* and cited above emphasizes the close connection between managing the rivers, nourishing the people, and gaining political legitimacy. Once Yu "opened the passages for the streams" and "deepened the channels and canals," the people were able to obtain enough grain to eat, and the different states "began to come under good rule."¹¹

The tradition of holding the state responsible for famine relief and water control, and focusing on the interdependence of human and heavenly roles in disaster causation, was rooted in the Confucian classics. The Confucian philosopher Mencius (372-289 BCE) insisted that a benevolent ruler could not get away with blaming the starvation of the people on a poor harvest, and was responsible for storing grain during times of plenty and distributing it during times of dearth. Blaming poor harvests for bringing starvation to the people, taught Mencius, was no less wrongheaded than "killing a man by running him through, while saying all the time, 'It is none of my doing. It is the fault of the weapon.'"¹² It was also Mencius who popularized the idea that a ruler's Heaven-granted mandate to rule (*tianming*) was not immutable, and could be revoked if the ruler strayed from the path of virtue by failing to act with the good of the people at heart. Disasters such as floods and droughts were viewed as warning signs that a dynasty had displeased heaven and was in danger of losing its mandate. This "Heaven-centered mode of political criticism" was elaborated on by the prominent Han dynasty Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu (195-105 BCE)¹³ and continued to be important into the

¹⁰ Randall A Dodgen, *Controlling the Dragon: Confucian Engineers and the Yellow River in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 1.

¹¹ *The Classic of History (Shang Shu)*, in *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. 3. James Legge, trans. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1865, reprint 1960), 77-78.

¹² *Mencius*, translated and with introduction by D.C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 1970): I.A.52.

¹³ William Theodore De Bary and Irene Bloom, comp. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. Vol. 1. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 305-306; 292. From Dong Zhongshu, *Chunqiu fanlu yizheng* 8:23b-25b.

Qing period (1644-1912). “Rainfall and sunshine were thought to be seasonal or unseasonal, appropriate or excessive, according to whether human behavior was moral or immoral,” states Mark Elvin in his essay on moral meteorology in late imperial China. Moreover, “some [individuals] counted for more than others. The emperor’s conduct was of preeminent importance; bureaucrats came in second place; and the common people ranked last.”¹⁴

The principle that major calamities could not be blamed on nature, but were instead connected to the ruler’s conduct, went far beyond the symbolic in terms of both origins and impact, and in fact “shaped expectations of imperial and bureaucratic responsibility” in important ways.¹⁵ “In comparative perspective,” writes J.R. McNeill, the Chinese state “appears remarkable for its ecological role.” In part because China’s “intensely anthropogenic landscape” required massive amounts of labor and resources, he continues, there more than elsewhere “the state took primary responsibility for building and maintaining many big waterworks.”¹⁶ In terms of the Yellow River in particular, erosion and the deposition of sediment caused the bed of the river to rise above the surrounding plain, so it was necessary to build huge embankments in order to keep the river in its place.¹⁷ Until the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), notes Randall Dodgen, China’s rulers normally pursued a defensive approach that attempted to protect people from the Yellow River by building dikes and diversion channels. The Yuan decision to construct the Grand Canal to link the capital at Beijing to the Yangzi Valley, however, required more complex hydraulic systems. “By binding their strategic well-being to Grand Canal transport and Yellow River control,” writes Dodgen, “the rulers of the Ming and Qing dynasties . . . linked the symbolic and the pragmatic to an unprecedented degree.”¹⁸ The officials in charge of managing the River during its “south-course period” (1194-1855), when the River ran to the sea south of

¹⁴ Mark Elvin, “Who Was Responsible for the Weather? Moral Meteorology in Late Imperial China.” *Osiris* 12 (1998): 213; 229-233.

¹⁵ Lillian M. Li, *Fighting Famine in North China: State, Market, and Environmental Decline, 1690s-1990s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2-3.

¹⁶ J.R. McNeill, “China’s Environmental History in World Perspective,” in *Sediments of Time: Environment and Society in Chinese History*, edited by Mark Elvin and Liu Ts’ui-jung. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 36-37.

¹⁷ Elvin, *Retreat of Elephants*, 24.

¹⁸ Randall A. Dodgen, *Controlling the Dragon: Confucian Engineers and the Yellow River in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 1-3.

the Shandong peninsula instead of north of it and captured the mouth of the Huai River, constantly battled to control the river. Elvin argues that the scale of the man-made effects that resulted from the herculean efforts these “river tamers” made to control the merged flows of the Yellow and Huai rivers “was probably unequalled anywhere in premodern history.”¹⁹

The Chinese state’s commitment to nourishing the people during times of famine also has a long history. Basic administrative measures to deal with famine were codified in China’s first imperial dynasty, the Qin (221-206 BCE), and from the fourteenth century on official treatises on famine relief abound.²⁰ For both political and cosmological reasons, the Qing state in particular devoted an extraordinary amount of bureaucratic attention and financial resources to both river management and famine relief.²¹ The Qing repertoire for retaining the mandate and responding to disasters included both rituals and an impressive array of relief measures. During times of disaster officials and rulers carried out elaborate rituals that aimed to move the heart of Heaven by demonstrating their sincerity and the depth of their concern for the people’s distress. As detailed by Jeffrey Snyder-Reinke, when faced with drought, Qing officials were responsible for a wide array of rainmaking rituals. These ranged from prohibiting the slaughter of animals, instituting community-wide fasts, and praying and burning incense at temples, to more extreme measures such as exposing themselves in the hot sun, being chained up, using their own blood to write rain prayers, or threatening or actually committing suicide to demonstrate their willingness to suffer and sacrifice for the people.²² Concrete relief measures were important as well. As Pierre-Etienne Will, R. Bin Wong, and most recently Lillian M. Li have demonstrated, in the eighteenth century Qing officials aimed to prevent natural disasters from resulting in famines altogether. Failing that, the state tried to restore agricultural production and avert social disorder by distributing emergency grain

¹⁹ Elvin 2004: 128-140.

²⁰ Li, *Fighting Famine*, 2-3.

²¹ For excellent studies of Qing famine relief policies, see Li, *Fighting Famine*; Pierre-Etienne Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine in Eighteenth-Century China*, trans. Elborg Forster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), and Will and R. Bin Wong, *Nourish the People: The State Civilian Granary System in China, 1650-1850* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1991).

²² Jeffrey Snyder-Reinke, *Dry Spells: State Rainmaking and Local Governance in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009): 20; chapter 4.

from massive state-run granaries free of charge or selling relief grain at below-market prices during a crisis, offering tax remissions or reductions, personally investigating disaster areas and giving relief according to the degree of disaster, encouraging local elites to operate soup kitchens or charitable granaries, and setting up public shelters for famine refugees.²³

1877: MOVING THE HEART OF HEAVEN, WINNING THE PEOPLE'S HEARTS

As demonstrated in *Tears from Iron*, Chinese responses to the North China Famine of 1876-79 both drew on a millennium of traditional Chinese thinking about famine causation and anticipated new issues that would become increasingly important in the Republican and PRC eras. Important continuities with high-Qing disasters include the assumption that it was the state's responsibility to relieve the starving, a strong rhetoric of paternalistic dismay, and an explicit focus on the suffering of famine victims. Due to the sharp decline caused by massive internal rebellions, fiscal crisis, and imperialist aggression, the late-Qing state proved unable to prevent the severe drought-famine from killing between nine and thirteen million people in five northern provinces. Both Qing officials and commoners agreed that it was the state's duty to provide substantive relief, however, and the beleaguered state made a concerted effort to deal with the calamity.²⁴ This strong sense of responsibility stemmed in part from the long-established Chinese practice of attributing the occurrence of famine to an interaction between humans, Heaven, and natural forces rather than to natural disasters alone.²⁵ Even the famine-era governor of Shanxi Province, the epicenter of the disaster, did not view the terrible drought as the root cause of the famine. "Although the present famine in Shanxi is called a natural disaster (*tianzai*), in fact it stems from human affairs," wrote Governor Zeng Guoquan.²⁶ Even when Heaven did send down a drought, Qing observers believed

²³ Will, 186; Li, 167; Will and Wong, 12-19; 43-57.

²⁴ According to the Shanxi gazetteer compiled after the famine, in Shanxi Province, where the famine was most severe, over 3.4 million people received state relief between 1877 and 1879. The gazetteer reports that government relief offices distributed a total of 10.7 million taels of relief silver and just over 1 million shi of relief grain in the province (*Shanxi tongzhi* 1892, juan 82, 18b-19a). See also Edgerton-Tarpley 2008, chapter 3.

²⁵ Li, *Fighting Famine*, 2, 13.

²⁶ Zeng Guoquan, *Zeng Zhongxiang gong (Guoquan) zouyi* [Zeng Guoquan's memorials], comp. Xiao Rongjue. Repr. *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan* 44. (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1969), 733.

that it could be prevented from escalating into a major famine if the emperor and his officials reflected on their policies, confessed misdeeds that may have offended Heaven, and organized relief efforts.²⁷

During the North China Famine, imperial edicts and official memorials about the famine were characterized by an emotional rhetoric of dismay that depicted rulers and officials as grief-stricken parents of the people. “I am anxious to the core and can neither rest nor eat in peace,” wrote Shanxi’s governor Bao Yuanshen in the spring of 1877, shortly before he resigned his post in despair. “The only way is to lead my staff to engage in penitential fasts and pray sincerely from morning to evening.”²⁸ Shanxi’s next governor, Zeng Guoquan, described in familial terms the pain that Shanxi officials felt when they saw people dying of hunger. Because they were unable to help their “children” and could only look at each other and weep, reported Zeng, “the local officials feel ashamed to be the father and mother of the people.”²⁹

Finally, the misery of the starving people in North China was a central focus in discussion and public coverage of the North China Famine; something that would not hold true in the 1938 disaster. The Shanghai-based *Shenbao* newspaper and a series of woodblock print famine illustrations published by merchant and literati philanthropists in the wealthy Jiangnan (lower-Yangzi) region, for instance, tried to motivate people to donate to relief efforts by describing in excruciating detail the torments experienced by starving women, men, and children. The *Shenbao* highlighted stories about famine-related cannibalism and the plight of women sold to human traders by their famished families. Particularly disturbing visual images distributed by Jiangnan philanthropists included a starving father who contemplates killing his daughter in order to feed her flesh to his starving mother, famine orphans lured to their death by a knife-wielding stranger, and a

²⁷ Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron: Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), chapters 3-4.

²⁸ *Guangxu chao Donghualu*, (Guangxu reign period [1875-1908] records from the Eastern Gate), vol. 1, compiled by Zhu Shoupeng, 1909 (reprint, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju chuban, 1958), 409-410. (Hereafter referred to as DHL).

²⁹ *Jingbao*, reprinted in *Shenbao* [The Shenbao Daily News], July 28, 1877.

philanthropist who returns to a slaughter-house to find that the young woman he had hoped to redeem had already been killed and cooked.³⁰

In the late 1870s internal unrest coupled with the presence and power of foreign enemies in the form of the imperialist West and Japan brought new concerns to the forefront in discussions of what the enfeebled late-Qing state's response to the famine should entail. These issues would become ever more central in the twentieth-century disasters that followed. Most crucially, the external threat precipitated bitter high-level debates over whether the state's limited funds should be spent on relieving famine or defending the empire from external threats. Members of a particularly outspoken coterie of metropolitan officials known as the Qingliu (pure stream) insisted that the ever-worsening famine in North China was the most urgent crisis facing the country. Qingliu officials emphasized the Confucian idea that the people were the foundation of the state, and asserted that "regarding the people's lives as important" would enable the dynasty to "win the hearts of the people" (*zhong min ming, shou min xin*). The failure to relieve the people, they warned, might lead to the kind of domestic unrest that had fueled the mid-nineteenth century rebellions that had nearly toppled the Qing dynasty.³¹

Qingliu officials asserted that the government's attention to self-strengthening projects such as shipyards and arsenals had squandered money that should have gone to feed the starving. A memorial submitted by Zhang Guanzhun, for instance, petitioned the Qing Court to order five coastal provinces to temporarily halt the work of their machinery and ship building bureaus. The government could then use the money saved to relieve the famished people. Coastal defense was urgent work only at certain times, he explained, but famine policy concerned the people's lives, so raising funds could not be delayed for even a day. Concluded Zhang, "Compare manufacturing weapons to protecting the people: which one is

³⁰ Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron*, chapters six and eight.

³¹ Chen Yongqin, "Wan Qing Qingliu pai de xumin sixiang" [The late-Qing Qingliu group's ideology of relieving the people], *Lishi dang'an 2* (2003): 105; DHL, 532. The direct quote about winning the people's hearts is taken from a memorial submitted by the Qingliu proponent Zhang Peilun early in 1878. "Relieving the people [*xu min*] is the basis of famine relief policy," wrote Zhang. For more on the Qingliu, see Edgerton-Tarpley, chapter 4.

unimportant and which is important; which can be delayed and which is urgent? This has long been that which the imperial wisdom sees clearly.” Echoed a second Qingliu supporter, Ouyang Yun: “Prioritize the people’s affairs in order to foster the life of the country; consolidate popular feeling in order to be in agreement with the will of Heaven.”³²

Working at cross purposes from the Qingliu coterie was an influential group of self-strengthening proponents who viewed foreign aggression as a greater threat than the famine, and wanted to limit government spending on relief efforts accordingly. These powerful officials fought hard to dissuade the Qing court from using money allocated for coastal defense to fight the famine. Their focus on the need to purchase weapons and ships stemmed from a series of foreign policy crises in the years preceding the famine, in particular China’s humiliating defeat at the hands of the British and French in the Arrow War of 1856-60, the Russian occupation of the rich Ili Valley of Xinjiang in 1871, and the “punitive expedition” that Japan landed on Taiwan in 1874.³³ The self-strengtheners’ claim that defending the country from external threats trumped nourishing the people in order to ensure domestic order was quite controversial in the 1870s, but would become more widely accepted during twentieth-century crises.

The Qing Court wavered between the two sides. The Court generally protected self-strengthening projects from Qingliu attacks, but also arranged for a considerable sum of coastal defense money to be diverted to pay for famine relief in Shanxi and Henan.³⁴ The debates between Qingliu officials and Self-strengtheners signified a collapse of consensus over how to contextualize a major famine. In late Qing China, the overall context in which praise and blame were negotiated was gradually shifting from one in

³² Chouban ge sheng huangzheng an [Proposals for preparing famine relief policies for each province],” in *Guojia tushuguan cang Qingdai guben neige liubu dangan*, comp. Sun Xuelei and Liu Jiaping (Beijing: Quanguo tushuguan wenxian suowei fuzhi zhongxin, 2003), 38: 18486-18490; 18687-18690. This compilation consists of unedited copies of imperial edicts about the famine, as well as famine-related correspondence that the Zongli Yamen received from and sent to the Grand Council, the Board of Revenue, and numerous high officials.

³³ Edgerton-Tarpley, chapter 4.

³⁴ In the fall of 1877, for example, Xia Tongshan, a Qingliu member and Vice President of the Board of War, memorialized to request that the Board of Revenue give 400,000 taels of customs tax money to famine relief efforts and that the Tianjin Coastal Defense Fund under Li Hongzhang’s jurisdiction provide another 300,000 taels. In response, Li agreed to divert 200,000 taels from the Tianjin Coastal Defense Fund to Shanxi and Henan relief work. (Edgerton-Tarpley, chapter 4).

which the key issue for rulers was avoiding the charge of losing the Mandate of Heaven, to one that highlighted protecting the empire against the onslaught of foreign and utterly blameworthy Western or Japanese powers. The 1938 flood is a particularly disturbing example of the result of this shift.

SHIFTING INTERPRETATIONS OF DISASTER: THE LOSS OF HEAVEN

The collapse of imperial China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries called into question the holistic explanation for famine provided by the traditional discourse of Heaven, and brought to the forefront new factors introduced by foreign ideas and enemies. Writes Rebecca Nedostup, “With the rise of revolution and republicanism and the fall of the Qing, the link between cosmos and ruler was severed. Sovereignty was meant to originate not from the balance of Heaven, Earth, and Man but from human agency alone.”³⁵ The fall of the Qing and the birth of China’s new Republican government in 1912 certainly did not lead to a decline in the number or severity of famines and other disasters. Instead, between 1900 and 1949 a politically-fragmented and semi-colonized China was ravaged by a succession of large-scale calamities so frequent and geographically extensive that Chinese observers as well as Western relief workers began to call the country the “Land of Famine.” Particularly lethal disasters included the North China drought famines of 1920-21, 1928-1930, and 1943-43, the Yangzi River flood of 1931, and the Yellow River flood of 1938.³⁶ According to famine scholar Xia Mingfang, between 1912 and 1949 major drought disasters killed approximately 15.7 million people, while another 2.5 million people perished as a result of floods.³⁷

Conceptualizations of what natural disasters signified and what response they called for changed significantly over the first few decades of Republican rule. Chinese intellectuals and policy-makers began to attribute major catastrophes to society’s failure to control nature, rather than to moral failings that drew down Heaven’s wrath. As policy makers came to expect science and the modern scientific state to prevent famines

³⁵ Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 9.

³⁶ Li, *Fighting Famine*, 283-285. The phrase “land of famine” comes from Walter H. Mallory, who served as the secretary of the China International Famine Relief Commission in the 1920s and who in 1926 wrote the influential book *China: Land of Famine*.

³⁷ Xia Mingfang, *Minguo shiqi ziran zainan yu xiangcun shehui* [Republican-era natural disasters and rural society] (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 2000), 395-399.

and floods altogether by controlling nature, when such crises did occur, it was more difficult to explain them and to respond effectively. By the 1920s, finds Kenneth Pomeranz in his work on the transformation of state worship at the Handan Rain Shrine, the Republican state “had become distant from the richness of both Confucian and popular political cosmologies, and left itself only coercive power and ‘traditionalism.’”³⁸ The collapse of faith in the imperial political and cosmological order resulted in the loss of what Li Wenhai and Zhou Yuan, leading PRC scholars of famine, identify as a crucial part of traditional responses to famine: the mindset of “examining and blaming oneself,” and adjusting policies accordingly.³⁹

The shift in focus from heavenly to natural causation was made possible in part by the fluid meaning of the Chinese character “*tian*” (天), which can be translated as the English word “Heaven,” but also as “nature” or “natural.” Because the character *tian* makes up the first half of *tianzai* (天灾), the two-character word commonly used for disaster, *tianzai* can be taken to mean a “heaven-sent disaster” or a “natural disaster.” As Chen Shao-Ming outlines in a recent volume on keywords concerning nature, there are three different but coexisting Chinese understandings of the character *tian* (heaven). According to the most ancient and politicized understanding of the word, which Chen traces back to the Zhou Dynasty (1045-256 BCE), “heaven can stand for a kind of supernatural force capable of determining all human affairs by telling good from evil or right from wrong.” It is this understanding of *tian* that supports the traditional claim that heaven warns unrighteous rulers via disasters such as floods and droughts. According to a second usage, which influences both Daoist and Confucian ideas of nature, *tian* “signifies the order of the whole universe” and serves as “a structuring force that makes life possible.” The first two understandings of *tian* blur the boundary between the Western concepts of heaven and nature and “assume the interaction between heaven and humans.” Only in its third understanding is *tian*

³⁸ Kenneth Pomeranz, “Water to Iron, Widows to Warlords: The Handan Rain Shrine in Modern Chinese History” *Late Imperial China* 12.1 (1994): 94.

³⁹ Li Wenhai and Zhou Yuan, *Zaihuang yu jijin: 1840-1919* [Disaster and famine: 1840-1919] (Beijing: Xinhua shudian, 1991), 14.

“merely a synonym of nature in the sense of the cosmic nature or the natural environment as opposed to culture or human society,” writes Chen.⁴⁰

It is the third and most narrow Chinese use of *tian* that most closely corresponds to the strand of modern Western scientific thought that viewed nature as a “simple mechanism entirely accessible to scientific and technical rationalism,” and a force that “would no longer be a source of praise or blame, but simply of observation and mastery.”⁴¹ Since it was this mechanistic vision of science and nature that most appealed to Republican-era Chinese reformers,⁴² it hastened their rejection of traditional moral and cosmological explanations of disasters, and strengthened their resolve to view *tianzai* as natural calamities that occurred when humans failed not so much to control themselves as to to control nature by using modern science and technology. In an article published in 1926, for instance, Zhu Kezhen, an influential scientist and educator who would in 1949 become the vice president of the new Chinese Academy of Sciences, criticized government officials for resorting to “praying for rain and [the] banning of animal slaughter” in the face of a severe drought. Calling such actions a policy of “fooling the people,” Zhu asserted that, “[The best way to deal with] disastrous droughts or floods is to prepare for them before they come, by reforestation, by water conservancy, and by the establishment of a large number of meteorological stations.”⁴³ Indeed, modernizers from a broad array of political and cultural persuasions echoed Chen Duxiu’s call to choose “the bright road of republicanism, science, and atheism” over “the dark one of autocracy, superstition, and divine

⁴⁰ Chen Shao-Ming, “*Zi Ran* (Nature): A Word that (Re)structures Thought and Life,” trans. Li Lanfen.. In *Keywords: Nature*, ed. Chen Shao-Ming (New York: Other Press, 2005), 102-105.

⁴¹ Pierre Zaoui, “Fables of Nature,” trans. Robert Bononno. In *Keywords: Nature*, ed. Chen Shao-Ming (New York: Other Press, 2005), 126. There are of course multiple, overlapping and often contradictory Western ideas of nature, some of which approximate the cosmological or political strands in Chinese understandings of *tian*. It was, however, the largely Anglo-American focus on how to use science and technology to dominate a “new, entirely material nature that was morally and religiously neutral” that most directly impacted China’s Republican-era discussions of disaster-causation (Zaoui ,115-126; Buck 1980, 190-191).

⁴² Peter Buck, *American Science and Modern China: 1876-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 190.

⁴⁴ Wang Zuoyue, “Saving China Through Science: The Science Society of China, Scientific Nationalism, and Civil Society in Republican China” *Osiris*, 2nd Series, Vol. 17, Science and Civil Society (2002), 307-308.

authority.”⁴⁴ Thus Republican-era Chinese modernizers began to view disasters as “technical problems that modern social and natural science will eventually resolve,”⁴⁵ instead of as cosmological warnings meant to convince officials or rulers to examine their actions and change course.

The rejection of the imperial state’s cosmological order was particularly pronounced during the Nanjing Decade (1927-37), which began when the Nationalist Party (Guomintang/KMT) defeated warlord armies and reunified China under Nationalist control. The forceful anti-superstition campaigns launched from within the Nationalist Party during the Nanjing Decade aimed to create a modern nation by “cleansing society of its deleterious aspects and fundamentally reordering it.” The campaigns included temple seizures, unpopular attempts to replace the traditional lunar calendar with a solar-based one and to substitute national ceremonies and modern public cemeteries for banned temple festivals and end-of-life rituals, and prohibitions on some ritual specialists and religious groups.⁴⁶ In short, like the French and Bolshevik “high-modernist” states examined by James C. Scott in *Seeing Like a State*, during the decade before the flood, the Nationalist state tried to unify and transform China by replacing the local with the national, and by creating a “new man” shaped by modern science and rationality.⁴⁷ The Guomintang’s attempt to “create a secular government stripped of rituals linking sovereignty to cosmic authority” proved difficult, however. Nedostup finds that it revealed both the “ultimate poverty of symbolic nationalism” and the limits of secularism.⁴⁸ The 1938 flood, as well as the Mao-era Great Leap Famine of 1959-61, suggest that the high-modernist rejection of long-held moral and cosmological interpretations of disaster made it easier for the state to engineer disasters, and harder for leaders to take responsibility for and deal with calamities once they occurred.

A NECESSARY SACRIFICE? THE BREACH AND THE FLOOD, 1938-47

The Yellow River flood of 1938-1947 was a self-inflicted catastrophe of epic proportions. As historian Diana Lary has narrated, nearly a year after the Japanese Imperial Army invaded China in July

⁴⁴ Chen Duxiu (1918), as cited in Nedostup, 15.

⁴⁵ Edkins, *Whose Hunger?*, xv, 15-18.

⁴⁶ Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes*, 15, 229.

⁴⁷ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 29-33; 195.

⁴⁸ Nedostup, 297, 291.

1937, China's military situation was utterly desperate. The previous winter Nanjing, the Nationalist capital, had fallen and its residents had been butchered by Japanese troops. By late May 1938, all but two of the country's major cities were lost. The Japanese were racing to take Wuhan, where the Chinese government had relocated, before the Nationalist government could evacuate west. This bleak situation convinced Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese military command in Wuhan to breach the Yellow River dike in an attempt to buy time by "using water in place of soldiers" (*yishui daibing*).⁴⁹

On June 4th, 1938 Chiang Kai-shek sent a telegraph ordering Chinese troops in the 53rd army group to breach the Yellow River dike. Over the next six days Chinese soldiers from several regiments attempted to dig through the dike in three different places by using explosives, spades hoes, steel chisels, and hammers. Their increasingly frantic efforts are vividly described in the diary of Xiong Xianyu, a staff captain in the 8th Division responsible for defending the area, and the records of Wei Rulin, the general in charge of supervising the project.⁵⁰ After two failed attempts, on the morning of June 9th water finally flowed out of the river at Huayuankou, a small village just north of Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan Province and the locus of a key railway junction that the Chinese military was desperate to hold in order to prevent the Japanese from using it to transport their troops directly to Wuhan.⁵¹ The entry from Xiong Xianyu's diary quoted at the beginning of this paper demonstrates that although Xiong was concerned about the devastation the flood would bring to counties in southeastern Henan, he justified the breach by focusing on what it could do for the country as a whole. "We succeeded in releasing the water before eight o'clock in the morning as planned," he wrote. "It is expected that within a few days [water] will spread to many counties in this area, which grieves the heart. But this action was taken only to hold back

⁴⁹ Diana Lary, "The Waters Covered the Earth: China's War-Induced Natural Disasters," in *War and State Terrorism: The United States, Japan, and the Asia-Pacific in the Long Twentieth Century*, ed. Mark Selden and Alvin Y. So (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 143-147; Lary, *The Chinese People at War: Human Suffering and Social Transformation, 1937-1945* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), 61.

⁵⁰The Number Two Archives of China, "1938 nian Huanghe jue di shiliao yizu" [Historical materials on the Yellow River breach of 1938, group 1], *Minguo dang'an* [Republican archives] 49 (1997, number 3): 9-14.

⁵¹ Diana Lary, "Drowned Earth: The Strategic Breaching of the Yellow River Dyke, 1938," *War in History* 8.2 (2001): 198-99; Lary, "Waters," (2004): 144, 148. The crucial railway junction between the east-west Longhai line and the north-south PingHan railway line between Beijing and Wuhan (Hankou) was in Zhengzhou. The Japanese aimed to speed their attack on Wuhan by capturing the PingHan line.

the enemy and save the overall situation. For this reason [we] did not hesitate to make this great sacrifice in order to strive for the final victory.”⁵²

The decision to breach the dike does not appear to have initiated the kind of controversies among the Nationalist leadership that the famine policy debates of the 1870s gave rise to. “There is no doubt that the decision came directly from Chiang Kai-shek,” writes Lary. “Nor is there any evidence of division or opposition within the upper echelons of the Chinese military.”⁵³ Chiang’s willingness to bring about a major flood in order to slow the Japanese advance may have stemmed in part from his conflation of the people’s livelihood and national defense. By the 1930s, explains Margherita Zanasi, Sun Yat-sen’s trope of the people’s livelihood, which in turn drew from the imperial trope of nourishing the people, “had come to be directly linked to national defense against Japanese imperialism.”⁵⁴ As Chiang argued in 1947 in an essay on Chinese economic thought:

According to Chinese economic theory, the government’s duties are to support the people on the one hand and to protect them on the other. National plans for the support of the people are plans for the people’s livelihood. But since this livelihood must also be protected, plans for livelihood become plans for the national defense. The people’s livelihood and national defense are thus inseparable.”⁵⁵

If Chiang and other important voices in the Nationalist government had come to view defending the nation as one and the same as protecting the people’s livelihood, then it becomes somewhat easier to understand how they could justify causing a flood that destroyed the livelihood of so many compatriots in rural North China in order to buy time to defend or evacuate the Nationalist government in Wuhan, and by extension, save the nation writ large. General Wei Rulin’s account of the breach, which he wrote in

⁵² “Selections from Xiong Xianyu’s diary,” in *Minguo dangan* 49 (1997, number 3): 10-11. In 1938 Xiong Xianyu was a 23-year-old staff captain in the Staff Department of the New 8th Division Headquarters.

⁵³ Lary 2004: 147. Lary supports her statement by noting that Chiang Kai-shek “did not deny responsibility for it at the time, as commander in chief, or later.” The Nationalist army’s centralized command style, Chiang’s frequent use of personal directives for military affairs, and his “penchant for micromanagement” offer additional reasons to assume that the decision to breach the dike came directly from Chiang. See Chang Jui-Te, “Chiang Kai-shek’s coordination by personal directives,” in Stephen R. MacKinnon, Diana Lary, and Ezra F. Vogel (eds.) *China at War: Regions of China, 1937-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 66, 81-83.

⁵⁴ Margherita Zanasi, “Fostering the People’s Livelihood: Chinese political thought between empire and nation” *Twentieth-Century China* 30.1 (2004): 29.

⁵⁵ Chiang Kai-Shek, “Chinese economic theory,” in *China’s Destiny and Chinese Economic Theory* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1947): 248; Zanasi, 29.

March 1939, provides an example of how those directly involved in breaching the dike made sense of their mission even after both the magnitude of the flood and its failure to save Wuhan were evident to all: “The torrent flooded down from Zhongmou to Weishi, Fugou, and Huaiyang, from Henan to Anhui and Jiangsu,” he wrote, “thus creating a great barrier to defend the country and protect the people (*baoguo weimin*), which was a great contribution to the Chinese nation.”⁵⁶ Wei’s account acknowledges that large swaths of land in three provinces had been flooded, but instead of discussing the disaster’s impact on the people in those areas, he immediately jumps to the flood’s significance for the nation.

Once the dike was finally breached, the breach soon widened into a 5000-foot-wide break, causing the Yellow River to depart from the northern course it had followed since 1855. In its new course the river flowed southeast instead of northeast, which meant that it flooded much of Henan, joined the Huai River in Anhui province and inundated much of northern Anhui, and finally flooded northern Jiangsu province as it flowed in three streams towards the sea.⁵⁷ Although the Chinese government made attempts to resettle flood refugees⁵⁸ and repair the breach, the war left the Nationalist state with an increasingly limited capacity to deal with such a massive disaster. Japanese military authorities in Henan also employed Japanese engineers and thousands of Chinese laborers in attempts to repair the dikes in territory under their control, but they too met with only limited success.⁵⁹ During the war the Communists came to control large swaths of the flooded areas of Henan, Anhui, and Jiangsu, in part due to the chaos caused by the flood. As Odoric Wou notes in his study of Communist mobilization in Henan, “Undoubtedly the people blamed the Nationalists for their misery. All this made the villagers in this particular region [Fugou, Henan] more disposed toward the Communist Revolution. It was in the Yellow

⁵⁶ Number Two Historical Archives, “1938 nian Huanghe jue di shi liao yizu: Wei Rulin Huanghe jue di jingguo qingxing ji” [Historical materials on the Yellow River breach of 1938, group 1], in *Minguo dang’an* (Republican archives) 49 (1997, number 3): 14.

⁵⁷ Lary 2001: 199-201; Li et al., “Renhuo tianzai,” (1994): 249-250.

⁵⁸ For more on the Nationalist state’s campaign to resettle flood refugees in Shaanxi Province, where they were encouraged to boost grain production by reclaiming land, see Micah S. Muscolino, “Violence Against People and Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China’s Henan Province, 1938-1945” *Environment and History* 17 (2011): 303-306.

⁵⁹ *New York Times*, April 6, 1939; June 20, 1942:6.

River inundated area (*huangfang qu*) that the Communists' anti-Japanese Yuwansu border base sprang into existence."⁶⁰

In terms of the strategic impact of the flood, as was the case in the Song and Ming dynasty breaches, the flooding did not prove to be a terribly effective defensive weapon.⁶¹ The flood postponed by five months but did not stop the Japanese advance on Wuhan, which fell in October 1938. It did halt the Japanese attack on Zhengzhou (temporarily), prevent the Japanese from taking some of the areas west of the floodlands in Henan and Anhui until 1944, and buy the Chinese government time to retreat west from Wuhan. By turning the north China plains into fields of mud, the flooding "increased Japanese logistical difficulties and prevented them from using tanks and mobile artillery."⁶² It also helped the Chinese maintain control of a 150-mile section of the north-south Beijing-Hankou railroad, thus making it more difficult for the Japanese to transport supplies from north to south.⁶³ As described by Erleen Christensen, the river itself and the "no man's land" of flooded territory around it created a porous, ever-shifting border between Japanese-occupied territory east of the river's new channel in Henan, and "Free China" areas on the western side of the river that remained under Nationalist control until Japan's Ichigo Offensive of April, 1944.⁶⁴ Gazetteer editors who in the 1980s compiled material on the flooding in Taihe 太和 County, one of the badly affected areas of northern Anhui, commented on the protection provided by the flood. In addition to great devastation, they acknowledge, the "eight years of flooding" meant that the "iron heel" of the invading Japanese army could only get to Shangqiu and Bo County (northeast of

⁶⁰ Odoric Y.K. Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 220.

⁶¹ For an example of Song-era attempts to use water in place of soldiers, see Ling Zhang, "Ponds, Paddies and Frontier Defence: Environmental and Economic Changes in Northern Hebei in Northern Song China (960-1127) *The Medieval History Journal* 14.1 (2011): 21-43. Ling Zhang finds that the series of ponds that the Northern Song government painstakingly constructed and maintained in Hebei in order to thwart northern invaders ultimately brought to the Song empire "no more than a century of wishful thinking," since few obstacles stood in the way of the Jurchen who marched into Hebei in 1126. (p. 32).

⁶² Lary 2001: 201-202; Hans Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China, 1925-1945* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 226.

⁶³ *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 1944: 4.

⁶⁴ Erleen J. Christensen, *In War and Famine: Missionaries in China's Honan Province in the 1940s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 10.

Taihe and the river's new course), and did not dare pass southwest through the inundated area. Thus "the people of Taihe escaped the bitterness of being trampled upon by a different race."⁶⁵

Reports from provincial newspapers, county gazetteers, *wenshi ziliao* (literary and historical materials), and missionary publications provide a sense of how the disaster was experienced by the primarily rural population of eastern Henan and northern Anhui, where the flooding was most severe. Yun Jinsheng's eyewitness account recorded in a Taihe 太和 County publication in 1986, for example, offers evocative descriptions of the devastation the flooding brought to northern Anhui. Yun recalls the collapse of people's houses, the sight and smell of drowned, bug-covered corpses floating in the water, the experience of crowding onto dikes (the only high ground in the area) with other survivors and witnessing people trapped in the water drown while waiting for rescue boats that never came, and the horror of the flood-related epidemics and famine conditions that killed many of those who survived the first onslaught of the flood.⁶⁶ According to the gazetteer publication, in 1938 94% of Taihe's total cultivated land was flooded, and 98% of the county's population was affected. During the eight years of the flood as many as 100,000 people fled Taihe each year to escape flooding and famine conditions. Zhaozhuang village had 112 people before the flood, state the editors, but only 60 of them remained after eight years of flooding, while of 1180 households in Hongshan, 1008 of them had to take to the roads to beg in order to survive, and 112 households sold their sons or daughters.⁶⁷

Missionary accounts of the flood underscore the predominantly rural character of the disaster. Because cities and county seats were usually built on higher ground and were protected by extra dikes, it was generally farmers and their fields who suffered the most during the flood. In her account written more than two months after the initial breach, Miss M. Hullah, a missionary with the China Inland Mission (CIM), described the situation in Henan's Xihua (Sihwa 西华) County where she was stationed:

⁶⁵ Taihe difangzhi bangongshi, "KangRi shiqi Taihe Huangshui zaihai de jidian ziliao," [Some materials from the Yellow River flood disaster in Taihe during the resist Japan era," *Xiyang chunqiu* 3 (1986): 70. The editors add that the Japanese did enter Taihe briefly in 1941, but were not willing to stay there and thus pulled back.

⁶⁶ Yun Jinsheng, "Huangshui jianwen" [Seeing and hearing the Yellow River flood] *Xiyang chunqiu* 4 (1987): 57-64.

⁶⁷ Taihe gazetteer office, "KangRi shiqi Taihe Huangshui zaihai de jidian ziliao," [Some materials from the Yellow River flood disaster in Taihe during the resist Japan era," *Xiyang chunqiu* 3 (1986): 67-68.

When the Yellow River dyke was opened many parts of Sihwa (which is very low-lying) were soon under water; but the water was quite a distance from the city in most directions. Just about five weeks ago, the waters broke through the dyke which protects the city, and in a very short time the city was completely surrounded by water. The fields all round the city area had given promise of a good harvest, but now all are flooded and spoilt. The view from the city wall was a sad one – as far as the eye could see in every direction there was water. The villages being a little higher than the surrounding country, though surrounded by water, it is still possible to live in them. Many of the houses on the outskirts have been washed away⁶⁸

The flooding would eventually destroy Xihua. “The city is dead,” reported CIM missionaries Louis Gausson and Henry Guinness in 1946, when they returned to Henan after having been forced to evacuate their stations in the spring of 1944 due to Japan’s Ichigo Offensive. “We had a walk round the city wall, and it is a strange sight,” they continued. “Outside the waste of dry mud, the silt coming as high as the wall, and inside, four huge ponds in the four corners of the city, running right up to the city main streets, with deserted houses standing in the water.” Their journey to Xihua was equally sobering. “We travelled along the dyke of the river. On both sides the land is heavily silted up by the Yellow River floods, so that the houses in many places are silted up to the window sills, or even to the eaves,” wrote Gausson and Guinness. “Most of the remaining people are living in tiny huts on the dyke, and eking out a living by cutting down trees or tearing down their houses and selling the timber for fuel.”⁶⁹

Missionary accounts also bring home the inexorable nature of the flood, and the fact that many areas that escaped flooding in 1938 were flooded in later years. On July 24 1939, for instance, more than a year after the breach, J. Herbert Kane, a CIM missionary stationed in Fuyang 阜阳, Anhui, wrote to the CIM headquarters in Shanghai to report that he and his wife were planning to evacuate to the mission station in Taihe, which was north of Fuyang and on higher ground, because Fuyang city was in imminent danger of flooding. “Already the water is almost two feet higher than last year’s high water mark,” he wrote. “This means that a much larger area of North Anhwei is under water than was the case a year ago.

⁶⁸ Miss M. Hullah, excerpt from letter written on 29 August 1938, in “China Inland Mission Monthly Notes,” October, 1938, p. 3. School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Library Archives, China Inland Mission Collection, Box 17, File 404.

⁶⁹ “Regional Notes,” *Field Bulletin of the China Inland Mission* 8.4 (April 1946): 7. SOAS Library Archives, China Inland Mission Collection.

Here and there dykes have been built, but with one exception all have been swept away. . . . The city is packed with refugees from the nearby villages and from the four suburbs. If the floods break through into the city there will be an awful panic.”⁷⁰ Mr. Kane wrote again on August 2nd, however, to explain that the breaking of a dike 18 *li* from the city had relieved the pressure on Fuyang itself, but had in the process flooded another four hundred square *li* of land outside of the city.⁷¹

Local publications in Fuyang and Taihe counties, two of the hardest-hit areas in northern Anhui, describe exhausting and largely unsuccessful wartime efforts to contain the flooding in their locales. According to the Fuyang County Gazetteer published in 1947, in the spring of 1939 the county government called on the people of Fuyang to build dikes to contain the flooding, and asked the provincial and central government to send engineers and relief money to help with the disaster. That fall, a Huai River area work-relief committee (*Huaiyu gongzhen weiyuanhui*) was established in Anhui, and each county was ordered to set up a work-relief group to build dikes in its locale. Although the people of Fuyang worked hard and the government sent two engineers to supervise, states the gazetteer, the dikes along the lower reaches of the Ci River 次河 near Fuyang were constantly breached, and the resulting flooding brought many casualties and turned formerly fertile land into deserts of silt.⁷²

A second Taihe County compilation published by the county gazetteer office in 1987 demonstrates that disagreements over where new dikes should be built and frustration over the amount of local labor required by the government for dike building played an important role in local-level experiences of the flood. In the winter of 1938, explain the editors, the two engineers the government had sent to try to manage the flooding in northern Anhui drew up a proposal to divert 10 to 15 percent of the flow of the Ci River into the nearby Fei River in order to reduce the pressure on the Ci River dikes, which were constantly suffering new breaches that endangered Taihe, Fuyang, and Yingshang counties. The

⁷⁰ “A letter from Mr. Kane,” *China’s Millions* LXV.10 (October 1939): 157. SOAS Library Archives.

⁷¹ Mr. J.H. Kane, excerpt from 24 July, 1939 and August 2, 1939 letters, in *Field Bulletin of the China Inland Mission* 1.8 (September 1939): 8. SOAS Library Archives, China Inland Mission Collection.

⁷² “Huanghe jue dou wei zai” [The Yellow River breach brings disaster], *Minguo Fuyang xianzhi xubian* [A continuation of the Republican Fuyang county gazetteer] (1947). Reprint, *Zhongguo difangzhi jicheng* 23 (Shanghai: Jiangsu gujie chubanshe, 1998): 620; 624.

proposal received immediate support from those three counties, but was strongly opposed by people living in counties on the east bank of the Fei River, who feared that diverting water into the Fei River would flood their homes and fields. According to the editors, as many as 500,000 people in Fengtai County wrote to the provincial government to protest the diversion proposal, while representatives from two other counties sent telegraphs voicing their concerns. The proposal was temporarily put aside, but was raised again in 1941. Counties east of the Fei River continued to oppose the plan, but it was eventually carried out in 1943.⁷³ The effort to build new protective dikes and repair breaches took a tremendous toll on the local population in Taihe. According to the Taihe gazetteer editors, the dike-construction project that began in the spring of 1939 required the labor of more than 150,000 local people. By 1943 there were 12 major embankment projects in existence in Taihe alone. “The huge dike building projects brought a heavy burden to the people,” write the editors. “In the winter and spring of every year, 60 percent of the labor force of our entire county had to be thrown into constructing new dikes or reinforcing old dikes.”⁷⁴

The situation was even worse in eastern Henan closer to the breach. As Micah Muscolino narrates in his recent article on Henan during the Second World War, 43 percent of Henan’s total population, or roughly 14.5 million people, were displaced by either the Japanese invasion, the flood, or the ensuing famine, leaving Henan with a larger refugee population than any other province.⁷⁵ The 1938 flood, he writes, inundated 32 percent of the fields in eastern Henan and buried “vast tracts of cultivated land” with silt. Farmers in the flooded areas were thus forced to migrate to other areas; within a year of the flood 900,000 refugees from Henan had moved west into Shaanxi Province. The loss of population meant that even after the floodwaters receded from some areas of Henan, it proved almost impossible for counties to recruit enough laborers to protect villages and farmland from the river’s new and ever-shifting course.⁷⁶

⁷³ Taihe gazetteer office, “Banian Huangfan,” [Eight years of flooding] *Xiyang chunqiu* 4 (1987): 46-50.

⁷⁴ “Banian Huangfan,” 51.

⁷⁵ Muscolino, “Violence Against People and Land,” *Environment and History* 17 (2011): 293.

⁷⁶ Muscolino, 296, 300.

Journalists for one of Henan's major newspapers, the *Henan Minguo Ribao* [Henan Republican daily], described the situation in the flooded areas of their province in some detail. In August 1938 Guan Sheng, a correspondent for the newspaper, visited the inundated area and wrote a vivid two-part account of what he observed there. In Yanling 鄢陵 County people's houses had collapsed, and one could only get around by boat. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep order. In the border area between Yanling and Weishi 尉氏 counties, villagers told him that more than 700 bandits (*tufei*) had recently overrun their village, and they had been forced to flee into the shallow floodwaters surrounding the village. The county head had sent forces to drive out the bandits, but they had burned more than 160 houses before they fled.⁷⁷ Conditions in Fugou 扶沟 County, just east of Yanling, were "ten times more terrible," continued Guan Sheng in the second part of his report. Eighty percent of the county had been flooded, and both starvation and the spread of infectious diseases (*chuanranbing*) were driving even farmers who owned a significant amount of land to flee their homeland with their wives and children.⁷⁸ Disease is also a factor discussed in some detail in the Taihe publications. Malaria and cholera were rampant among flood refugees, stated the editors, and many also suffered from dysentery, smallpox, measles, jaundice, typhoid, scabies and skin ulcers. Yun Jinsheng, who experienced the flood as a child, attributes the spread of diseases among the flood refugees crowded together on dikes or other high ground to the lack of clean drinking water, sanitation, and sufficient food. In his own family his cousin suffered through smallpox, his father and uncle caught typhoid, and both of his grandfathers and four of his younger brothers and sisters perished of various illnesses during the years of flood.⁷⁹

In Henan, the destruction of rural infrastructure caused by the flood, in combination with serious droughts and heavy military tax and grain levies for the nearly one million soldiers stationed in the province, resulted in the Henan Famine of 1942-1943, which killed two to three million people. "The precipitous drop in agricultural acreage and grain output produced crushing poverty in the rural areas,"

⁷⁷ *Henan Minguo Ribao*, 25 August, 1938:1.

⁷⁸ *Henan Minguo Ribao* 26 August, 1938: 1.

⁷⁹ Taihe gazetteer office, *Xiyang chunqiu* 3 (1986): 67-68; Yun Jinsheng, *Xiyang chunqiu* 4 (1987): 59-60.

writes Wou. “There were reportedly ten thousand hungry flood victims gathered in major cities every day.”⁸⁰ Muscolino adds that the Nationalist government’s attempts to enlist civilian laborers to repair dikes in the flooded areas “added to the burdens on Henan’s farming population by interrupting agricultural activities at a pivotal time of year.”⁸¹ Missionaries stationed in Henan also drew connections between the flood and the onset of famine conditions. “The water has again seriously flooded our area, wiping out the autumn crops which were coming on nicely and on which so many hopes were set,” wrote a CIM missionary stationed in Xihua in 1940. “Now these flooded areas exceed in extent those of last year, and the outlook is much worse, as there have been no crops at all for three seasons, and grain, fuel, and money are all used up.”⁸² Dr. Catherine Simmons, a CIM missionary stationed in Xihua in 1942-43, attributed the famine there to a combination of military grain taxes, locusts, drought, and flooding. “Military grain taxes have been getting heavier and heavier, and ever since I have been in Honan strings of carts have been streaming out of the Province, loaded with military wheat. So there were no reserves,” she wrote. After describing the locusts that left behind them a “bare, brown land, stripped of every vestige of green,” and the increasingly frantic prayers for rain during the severe drought of 1942, she explained in vivid terms the crushing impact of yet another round of summer flooding: “The urgent need for rain then was that the next year’s wheat might be planted: only a month to planting time; only three weeks; only two – and then the dykes of the Yellow River gave way and the waters swept over the plain, right into the outskirts of the city, and the last hope of planting wheat was gone!”⁸³

For the rural people in the path of the flood, then, the decision to breach the Yellow River dike led to a catastrophic loss of arable land and agricultural labor, mass migration, inter-village conflict over where to build new dikes, and, for many, death from drowning, communicable diseases, or famine.

⁸⁰ Odoric Y.K. Wou, “Food Shortage and Japanese Grain Extraction in Henan,” in Stephen R. MacKinnon, Diana Lary, and Ezra F. Vogel (eds.) *China at War: Regions of China, 1937-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 176-178.

⁸¹ Muscolino, 301.

⁸² “Floods and Famines in Honan,” *China’s Millions* LXVI.1 (January 1940): 13. SOAS Library Archives.

⁸³ Dr. Catherine Simmons, “Sidelights on the Famine,” *China’s Millions* LXIX (July-August, 1943): 32. SOAS Library Archives.

SACRIFICE AND SCIENCE: WARTIME RHETORIC OF DISASTER

Aware of the radical impact of its actions, the Nationalist government during the war did not admit responsibility for unleashing the flood. Instead, official accounts claimed that the Japanese military had deliberately caused the breach by bombing the Yellow River dike with warplanes in the battle for Zhengzhou. The Japanese government and military, however, vehemently denied that charge.⁸⁴ The international press was also skeptical of the Chinese claim almost from the beginning, largely because the flood was so obviously a boon to the Chinese army.⁸⁵ On June 26th the *New York Times* printed a lengthy article by O.J. Todd, who had served as a consulting engineer to the Yellow River Commission before the war. “It is a man-made flood this time for there seems little doubt that the Chinese broke the dikes to check their Japanese enemies who have been mired and many of them drowned in the inundated areas,” asserted Todd. By the time the international media covered Japan’s second campaign to take Zhengzhou in 1941, it routinely attributed the 1938 breach to the Chinese.⁸⁶

China’s major newspapers, on the contrary, strongly supported the Chinese government’s explanation of the breach in the flurry of articles they printed about the flood over the summer of 1938.⁸⁷ Some publications directly engaged Japan’s denial of responsibility. In the past Yellow River floods had always been natural disasters (*tianzai*), asserted the leading Shanghai-based journal *Dongfang Zazhi* roughly six weeks after the breach, but this time the calamity was caused by Japanese bombings. The Japanese had used all possible means to “subjugate our nation and exterminate our race,” charged the journal, but none defied human reason as much as their use of the Yellow River. Yet rather than admit

⁸⁴ Lary 2001: 199, 205.

⁸⁵ *New York Times*, June 13, 1938: 1; June 14, 1938: 12.

⁸⁶ *New York Times*, June 26, 1938:6; October 3, 1941:9.

⁸⁷ Although leading provincial newspapers in the flood-stricken provinces continued to publish articles about the flood throughout the war, in-depth coverage of the disaster in national newspapers largely petered out in the fall of 1938, when attention shifted to the increasingly grim war news from the Yangzi valley region. It resumed in 1946, when the Nationalists and Communists began to fight over how and when to repair the dike and return the Yellow River to its original course.

their guilt, the Japanese were actually reporting that the Chinese themselves had destroyed the dike. “We believe and hope this kind of false accusation won’t mislead the world,” it concluded.⁸⁸

Even in the freewheeling atmosphere of Wuhan in 1938, where under the newly-formed Guomintang-Communist united front government no one party or warlord was able to exert strict control over the Chinese press,⁸⁹ newspapers from across the political spectrum upheld the government’s account. Even the Communist-launched *Xinhua Ribao* (New China Daily) the only Communist-run newspaper to be openly published in Guomintang-controlled territory during the war, blamed the Japanese for the flood. “The southern dike of the Yellow River was breached by the barbarous enemy, resulting in water flowing out and flooding southwards,” reported the newspaper on June 12, 1938.⁹⁰ It was not until 1946, well after the Japanese defeat, that the *Xinhua Ribao* first accused the Nationalists of breaching the dike. The relatively pro-Guomintang *Dagongbao* (The impartial), which historian Stephen MacKinnon identifies as “probably the leading daily in the country” in the 1930s, never took that step.⁹¹ After directly blaming the Japanese for the breach over the summer of 1938, the paper gradually dropped all attempts to explain how the breach had occurred, and simply used the passive voice whenever it mentioned the genesis of the flood.⁹² Most likely a patriotic unwillingness to criticize the government in the heat of war, coupled with a desire to use the flood to mobilize people against the Japanese, best explains the Chinese media’s decision not to question the rapidly discredited government account.

Media reports about the flood also suggest an intriguing shift in the language of sacrifice. In the 1870s the intense suffering experienced by famished commoners -- and the urgent need to relieve that suffering -- took center stage in coverage of the famine. It was officials who were expected to sacrifice on behalf of their starving “children” by weeping, fasting, exposing themselves in the sun for hours, or

⁸⁸ *Dongfang Zazhi* [Far Eastern (Far Eastern Miscellany), August 1, 1938: 57-58.

⁸⁹ Stephen R. MacKinnon, “Press Freedom and the Chinese Revolution in the 1930s,” in *Media and Revolution: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Jeremy Popkin (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995): 174-178; MacKinnon, *Wuhan, 1938: War, Refugees, and the Making of Modern China*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), chapter 5.

⁹⁰ *Xinhua Ribao* [New China Daily], June 12, 1938.

⁹¹ MacKinnon 1995: 176-178.

⁹² *Dagongbao* [The Impartial], June 13, 1938; July 5, 1938; July 29, 1938; July 4, 1946.

even threatening suicide to move the heart of Heaven. In contrast, during the Yellow River flood it was the extent to which flood refugees themselves were laying down their lives for the country, as well as the need to redeem that sacrifice, that caught the attention of the Chinese press. China's wartime media gave relatively little attention to the misery experienced by flood refugees. National newspapers were most interested in blaming Japan for the breach, celebrating the difficulties the flood caused for Japanese troops, charting the progress of the flood waters, detailing the Chinese government's attempts to repair the breach, and using the example of the flood victims to inspire readers to resist the Japanese. They proved as willing as Chiang's military command to paper over actions that brought widespread suffering to civilians, as long as those actions contributed to national survival. "We should say, it is for the nation that the disaster victims in eastern Henan endure suffering. Their sacrifice (*xisheng*) is a sacrifice borne for the nation," pronounced the *Xinhua Ribao* in June 1938. A month later it printed a letter titled "If we can save one more compatriot affected by the disaster, we will add a little more power to resist the enemy." The letter asked city residents in Wuhan to donate a full day's wages to the flood relief effort. "Brothers and sisters," wrote the committee in charge of the donation campaign, "these donations are not only a work of charity, but also a way of enhancing our power to resist the enemy and build a new state."⁹³

The Chinese media's focus on sacrifice was to some extent shaped by the Nationalist government's wartime rhetoric. Like many other leaders in power during World War II, Chiang Kai-shek constantly urged the Chinese people to sacrifice for the war effort. "After six years of sacrifices and bloodshed we should seize upon this most crucial period, redouble our efforts and intensify our struggle before we can reap the rewards for our sacrifices and console the spirits of our martyrs," he said in the message he delivered to the nation in July 1943 to mark the sixth anniversary of the Japanese invasion. Chiang urged "the armed forces and civilians of the nation" to strengthen their will to resist and fight the Japanese. "If by so doing we can hold back such a demon from the world," he continued, "even if we

⁹³ *Xinhua Ribao*, June 25, 1938; July 26, 1938.

endure sacrifices and sufferings ten times our present sacrifices and sufferings, it will be a contribution well worth the price.”⁹⁴

Even correspondents for the *Henan Minguo Ribao*, which devoted considerably more attention to the situation of flood refugees than did national newspapers, often highlighted the national and military implications of their suffering. “In order to have victory in the Resistance War, these Yellow River flood refugee compatriots experienced ten times or a hundred times our suffering (*kunan*), so we must quickly arise to relieve these refugee compatriots in order to bring about the survival and happiness of the entire Chinese nation,” counseled Guan Sheng after his tour through the flooded counties in eastern Henan. Young men from the inundated area should be encouraged to join the army and fight against the Japanese invaders, he suggested, and the government should organize cultivating teams that would send refugees to reclaim land and foster agricultural production in Shaanxi, Gansu, and Qinghai. Some of Guan Sheng’s descriptions of flood refugees awaiting relief in also appear decidedly distancing:

The disaster victims, having experienced the flood, were sunburned to the black-yellow color of African slaves. Upon hearing that someone would go there to investigate the disaster and give out relief, they all squatted beside the water, eyes fixed into the distance hopelessly, waiting. When we arrived at the village and got out of the boat, it made me imagine the mood of the very moment when Columbus discovered the New World.”⁹⁵

In just a few sentences, this correspondent for a leading newspaper in Henan likens flood refugees in his own province to both African slaves and to the Amerindians that Columbus met upon arriving in the Americas. Guan Sheng did not explain his Columbian comparison any further, but it seems that he saw the flood refugees as having been stripped of the vestiges of civilization.

The *Henan Minguo Ribao* continued to focus on the flood’s importance for the war effort and national salvation throughout the war. An unnamed editorialist writing in July of 1943, when the still unrepaired breach resulted in yet another devastating summer flood in Henan, went so far as to describe the flood’s contribution to the country as “sacred” (*shensheng*), thus underscoring a shift in the locus of the sacred from Heaven to the nation state. “I have already explained the great harm the Yellow River

⁹⁴ Chiang Kai-Shek, “Six years of sacrifices,” in Chinese Ministry of Information, comp., *The Collected Wartime Messages of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, 1937-1945* (New York: John Day Company, 1946), 745-749.

⁹⁵ *Henan Minguo Ribao*, 26 August, 1938; 25 August 1938: 1.

flooding brings to Henan,” he wrote, “but the contribution of the flood to the resistance war and the establishment of the country is important and sacred.” Without the shield offered by the flood, he explained, the situation of the war and of Henan Province would be unimaginable. Thus the central government and people throughout the country, he concluded, should pay great attention to solving the problem of the flood in order to reward the people of Henan for their sacrifice and suffering.⁹⁶ Well aware of the limited capacity the beleaguered Nationalist state had to deal with the multiple crises caused by the Japanese invasion, the newspaper also defended the government’s decision to prioritize the war effort over flood relief. “The river course has been damaged, but it is hard to give attention to both military affairs and the people’s livelihood,” explained another editorial published in 1943. “Now we are fighting against the enemy invaders and all the government’s financial resources are exhausted for the Resistance War, so it must spend less money on repairing dikes.”⁹⁷ Wartime media coverage of the Yellow River flood demonstrates how nationalist sentiments, inflamed by the Japanese invasion, were used by newspapers across the political spectrum to justify the sacrifices made by disaster victims and allow the Chinese state to sidestep responsibility for the flood.

THE TECHNOLOGIZATION OF DISASTER

Rather than calling on policy makers to “examine and blame themselves” and demonstrate a willingness to change course in order to move the heart of Heaven, as was expected of officials in the 1870s, during the war with Japan the Chinese press and government often looked to modern technology and international aid to bring the flood disaster to an end.⁹⁸ The proposals put forward in a 1943 *Henan Minguo Ribao* editorial on ways to eliminate Yellow River disasters once and for all, for instance, revolved mainly around technology. Stones were crucial for constructing sound dikes, reasoned the journalist, so “in order to facilitate the transport of stones, after dikes on both sides are repaired, we will

⁹⁶ *Henan Minguo Ribao*, July 22, 1943.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, September 2, 1943.

⁹⁸ Ironically, sophisticated understandings of river engineering were important not only during the postwar campaign to repair the dike, but also during the frantic attempts to breach it. Wei Rulin’s account of the breach offers a detailed overview of five key reasons why the two attempts to breach the dike at Zhaokou were unsuccessful, and credits the “successful” outcome at Huayankou in part to the lessons learned from those two failures (*Minguo Dang’an* 1997: 13-14).

build a railway on them.” This railroad, while built especially for transporting stones, “can also be used for national defense needs.”⁹⁹ A second editorial provides an example of “high-modernist” faith in scientific and technical progress and mastery of nature that, as Scott has demonstrated, is often a hallmark of state-initiated disasters, particularly when combined with a weak civil society and an authoritarian state that repudiates the past and uses emergency conditions to push forward its attempts to reorder society and nature.¹⁰⁰ “When the war ends the government will return to the discussion of relief and will put into effect fundamental plans to control the river and make it return to its original course. It will use scientific methods to eliminate flood danger permanently, and will ask the United Nations for relief assistance,” wrote the journalist.¹⁰¹ The editorial also highlights the Guomindang’s willingness to solicit foreign aid, an attitude not shared by their late-Qing or Mao-era counterparts.

Drawing on modern technology and international aid also became a major focus in the Nationalist government’s postwar Relief and Reconstruction publications about plugging the breach and controlling the Yellow River. After the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was established late in 1943, the Nationalist government requested hundreds of millions of dollars of aid from UNRRA. Foreign engineers and an international staff were invited to help administer postwar relief initiatives, in particular the massive Yellow River Project that aimed to close the breach and return the river to its pre-1938 course.¹⁰² That project began early in 1946, with the January shipment to Henan of “seventeen carloads of engineering equipment” from UNRRA. The Chinese National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (CNRRA), the agency responsible for managing the relief efforts within China, announced that “about 330,000 laborers,” aided by UNRRA equipment, would be employed for six months to plug the breach at Huayuankou, repair 400 miles of dikes along the old river bed, and return the river to its old course. UNRRA officials, arguing that diverting the river would reclaim the 2 million

⁹⁹ *Henan Minguo Ribao*, August 31, 1943: 1.

¹⁰⁰ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 4-5.

¹⁰¹ *Henan Minguo Ribao*, September 2, 1943.

¹⁰² Katrine R.C. Green, “UNRRA’s Record in China,” *Far Eastern Survey* 20.10 (1951): 100-102; O.J. Todd, “The Yellow River Reharnessed,” *Geographical Review* 39.1 (1949): 38-51.

acres of land flooded by the river and permit the planting of some 200 million additional bushels of grain, called diversion of the river the “most important contribution UNRRA can make to the agricultural rehabilitation of China.”¹⁰³

The rush to plug the breach, however, soon became a major bone of contention between the Nationalists and the Chinese Communists as they descended into civil war. When the breach caused the Yellow River to change course in 1938, as many as 500,000 people gradually moved into the old bed of the Yellow River and began farming there. The Chinese Communists took control over many of those areas during the war. After the war the Nationalist government aimed to plug the breach and restore the river to its old course within six months of the project’s March 1, 1946 start date. In contrast, representatives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wanted to delay the process to ensure the safety of those people living in the river’s old course.¹⁰⁴ As the *New York Times* succinctly explained in January 1947, “Along its [the Yellow River’s] old course through Shantung, farmers cultivated the rich soil of its old bed. Along the new course they fled for their lives, were drowned or starved. It so happened that the old course ran through lands largely controlled by the Yen’an Communists, the new course through lands controlled by the Nanking regime. Repairs on the dikes to return the river to its historic channel have therefore become a political issue.”¹⁰⁵

As relations between the two parties deteriorated in the spring of 1946, newspapers that favored one or the other began to use the Yellow River flood for decidedly different purposes. Nationalist officials and relatively pro-Guomindang newspapers like the *Dagongbao* continued to emphasize the need for foreign assistance and technological solutions. A lengthy editorial printed in the *Dagongbao* in July 1946 exemplifies the newspaper’s generally positive coverage of the UNRRA-assisted plan to repair the breach. “The breach plugging work in Huayuankou is a very great project, because the breach is 1,460 feet wide,” stated the author of a lengthy editorial from July 1946. Plugging it thus entailed building temporary

¹⁰³ *New York Times*, January 20, 1946: 20; April 5, 1946: 6; May 13, 1946: 3; *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1947.

¹⁰⁴ *Dagong bao*, May 12, 1946; May 18, 1946; June 2, 1946; June 9, 1946.

¹⁰⁵ *New York Times*, January 12, 1947: E8.

bridges on either side of the breach, digging diversion canals for the excess water, and gradually filling in the breach with tons of stones. The correspondent described the bridge stakes shipped in from the United States, as well as the electric generators, machine workshop, pumps, giant cranes, and excavators scattered all over the work site, and noted that, “standing beside these machines, we felt quite ignorant.” Since the project began on March 1, he continued, “with the help of international friends and owing to the hard labor of tens of thousands of workers,” a thousand feet of the western dike had already been built.¹⁰⁶ A *Dagongbao* report about the goals of a group of consultants sent to study the Yellow River in January 1947 highlights the ambitious engineering goals of the post-war Nationalist state. The delegation, reported the newspaper, aimed not only to bring the River under control, but to “permanently solve the historic problems caused by the River so as to bring peace to the people and life to North China.”¹⁰⁷

As the negotiations between the Communists and the Nationalists reached a stalemate in January, 1947, the *Dagongbao* printed a lengthy Guomindang government press report which explained, in very technical terms, why closing the breach could not be delayed for five more months as the CCP representatives had proposed. According to the government’s publicity department spokesperson, Peng Xuepei, the breach must be plugged immediately, while the water level was not too high and the flow capacity was only about 1000 meters (*gongchi*) per second. After early February, ice would begin to melt and giant chunks of ice would break the new dike. Even if the dike could withstand the ice, it would never last through the high-water periods that began in late March, when the flow capacity would be 4000 meters per second, and peaked in late July, when the flow capacity could be 30,000 meters per second. The breach needed to be plugged between October and January, he concluded, making a five-month delay counterproductive. Concerning the CCP’s claim that closing the breach immediately would harm those people living in the old riverbed, continued Peng, they had all known that the river would one day be returned to its previous course, so they had not built permanent houses. Moreover, those forced to move

¹⁰⁶ *Dagongbao*, July 4, 1946. The *Shenbao* printed a similarly triumphalist description of the closure of the breach in January 1947. It too highlighted the science and engineering expertise needed to complete such a complex and massive project (*Shenbao*, January 12, 1947: 133).

¹⁰⁷ *Dagongbao*, January 7, 1947.

would receive compensation.¹⁰⁸ This press release, filled with precise measurements and technical information, provides a telling example of the Nationalist government's technologization of disaster.

MOBILIZE THE MASSES: CCP USES OF THE FLOOD DURING THE CIVIL WAR

The Chinese Communists, in contrast, depicted the breach itself, as well as the Guomintang's plan to repair it quickly, as prime examples of Nationalist China as a failed state. As soon as the UNRRA and Chinese-government led effort to plug the breach began in March of 1946, the Communist-run *Xinhua Ribao* began to argue that the old riverbed and its dikes must be repaired before the breach could be closed, and that villages living in and alongside the river's old course must receive compensation.¹⁰⁹ Then in May 1946, roughly nine months after Japan's defeat, the paper finally broke with the official narrative and directly accused the Guomintang of having breached the dike in the first place. The paper printed an overview of a Communist Party spokesman's claim that the Guomintang had dispatched troops to breach the dike at Huayuankou in 1938 in order to prevent the enemy's invasion, and that because the Nationalists had kept the plan a secret, the number of compatriots (*tongbao*) who had lost their lives and possessions could not be counted.¹¹⁰

The CCP's rhetoric escalated rapidly after its initial accusation. Using water in place of soldiers was "an idea too outdated for modern wars," charged the *Xinhua Ribao*, and pointed out that the flood had failed to save even Wuhan from the Japanese.¹¹¹ By January 1947, when the Communist-versus-Nationalist struggle over plugging the breach was most intense, the communists had developed a broader argument about the Yellow River breach. In contrast to Guomintang accounts and reports in the *Dagongbao* and the *Shenbao*, the *Xinhua Ribao* mentioned foreign assistance and technology only tangentially.¹¹² The newspaper's primary postwar focus was instead the human suffering caused by the flood and the practical and moral worthlessness of using flooding as a weapon of war. By relying on

¹⁰⁸ *Dagongbao*, January 17, 1947.

¹⁰⁹ *Xinhua Ribao*, April 11, 1946:2.

¹¹⁰ *Xinhua Ribao*, May 14, 1946: 2.

¹¹¹ *Xinhua Ribao*, May 30, 1946: 3.

¹¹² *Xinhua Ribao*, January 8, 1947: 2.

flooding instead of harnessing the power of the masses to withstand the Japanese invasion, charged the *Xinhua Ribao*, the Guomintang had both failed militarily and brought extreme suffering on the common people. In Henan alone, it continued, 325,037 people had drowned, another 600,000 had fled, some 600,000 houses had been submerged, and over 8 million mu of arable land had been flooded. “What a debt of blood the Guomintang owes our people!” it exclaimed.¹¹³

A second *Xinhua Ribao* editorial, this one published on January 12, used the breach to call into question the very *Chinese-ness* of the Guomintang. The piece began by charging that because the Guomintang had suddenly moved (in December) to unilaterally close the breach at Huayuankou, the resulting flow of water into the old course was threatening to rob several million people of their lives and property. It then contrasted the Guomintang government’s lenient treatment of American soldiers who had raped a female student at Peking University the previous month with its treatment of Chinese people living in the old river bed. “They [the Guomintang authorities] are so considerate and obedient to the American army that insults our nation and kills our compatriots,” wrote the journalist, “but when it comes to their own compatriots they use Yellow River water to flood their lives and property! Can the government controlled by the Guomintang still be called ‘the Chinese government?’ Can the people who serve the Guomintang still be called ‘Chinese people?’”¹¹⁴

Shortly before it was closed down by the Nationalist government in February 1947, the *Xinhua Ribao* published a strident flood-related editorial accusing the Nationalists of failing to value the people. In response to Guomintang critiques that the Communists was causing suffering by refusing to complete the dike repair project downstream, the paper asked:

Who is the maker of the flood? It is no one else but the Guomintang authorities. In the summer of 1938 when the Japanese invaders entered Henan Province and Wuhan was threatened, the Guomintang did not raise morale and organize the masses to hold back the enemy . . . , but instead tried to depend on natural advantages to force the Japanese army back However, when the Guomintang authorities opened the breach, they didn’t inform the people in advance, so people in Henan and Anhui were drowned. . . . If the Guomintang really wanted to show consideration for the people’s interests, they could not have breached the dike.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ *Xinhua Ribao*, January 8, 1947: 2.

¹¹⁴ *Xinhua Ribao*, January 12, 1947: 2.

¹¹⁵ *Xinhua Ribao*, January 21, 1947: 1-2.

Throughout this editorial the *Xinhua Ribao* contrasted the CCP's policies, which it claimed were all enacted "to safeguard the people's interests," with the Guomindang's lack of basic concern for the people's welfare. It concluded by claiming that the real reason the Guomindang authorities were in such a hurry to close the breach was they thought it would help them defeat the CCP. "They don't realize that the Chinese Communists depend on the power of the people, not geographical conditions," stated the journalist; "they are destined to fail."¹¹⁶

The Nationalists succeeded in closing the breach on March 15, 1947 in spite of Communist opposition. The Yellow River began flowing back into its original course in full the following day.¹¹⁷ That May, on the anniversary of the May 4th Movement, the Nationalist government held a "lavish ceremony" at Huayuankou to celebrate its success. Chiang Kai-shek gave a speech commending the workers and officials who closed the breach and remembering those workers who died at their posts during the project.¹¹⁸ Communist representatives were not present at the ceremony, but within two short years of the ceremony they were in control of the country, while Chiang and many of the officials he commended had fled to Taiwan. Upon taking power, the Communists quickly adopted many of the Nationalists' modernizing goals, among them controlling and harnessing the Yellow River.

CONCLUSION

The Yellow River flood of 1938 provides an instructive mid-way point between late-Qing and Maoist responses to and coverage of major catastrophes. Some aspects of the disaster -- in particular the focus on saving the nation-state even at the cost of widespread and intense human suffering, the militarization of the language of disaster relief, and the muted descriptions of the victims of the catastrophe -- mark a sharp departure from late-imperial responses, but foreshadow in interesting ways features of the Great Leap Famine of 1959-61, which killed roughly 30 million people.¹¹⁹ Unlike the North China Famine but like

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ *Dagongbao*, March 16, 1947; March 17, 1947.

¹¹⁸ *Shenbao*, May 5, 1947; Lary 2004: 156.

¹¹⁹ For good recent studies of the Great Leap Famine, see Kimberly Manning and Felix Wemheuer, eds. *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011); Ralph Thaxton Jr., *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine and the*

the even more devastating Great Leap disaster, the 1938 flood was directly precipitated by the policy decisions of the Chinese government. Like the PRC government during the Great Leap, in 1938 the Nationalist government refused to take responsibility for the disaster it had created. Yet akin to their Qing predecessors and quite distinct from PRC leaders, the Guomindang admitted the extent of the disaster, allowed media coverage of it, and sought non-governmental donations and foreign assistance to bolster the limited amount of relief the state could provide.

Wartime media coverage of the Yellow River flood demonstrates how nationalist sentiments, inflamed by Japanese brutality, were used to justify and even sacralize the suffering of flood refugees. Moreover, the “technologization” of disaster shifted focus away from the moral, cosmological, and political dimensions of calamity, thus enabling leaders to sidestep culpability for disasters to a degree that would have been impossible for their Qing predecessors. In a sense, the government’s very willingness to create such a catastrophe by breaching the Yellow River dike in the first place highlights the extent to which the self-strengtheners’ once controversial claim -- that defending China from invaders trumped relieving the misery caused by famines or floods -- had gained general acceptance by the 1930s.

During the Chinese civil war, the Guomindang’s focus on modern technology and foreign assistance proved to be less appealing to many Chinese than the Communist emphasis on “safeguarding the people’s interests” and harnessing their power. This can be explained in part by the fact that the CCP’s focus on human suffering over technology, and on the power of the Chinese masses rather than international assistance, resonated with and drew power from much older, Confucian/Qingliu understandings of a benevolent government as a government that both protects and depends upon the people for its survival. The fact that the Chinese Communists envisioned a more active role for “the people” than their late-Qing or Nationalist counterparts may also have had a certain appeal. Late imperial rhetoric of disaster expected

Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and Yang Jisheng, *Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai da jihuang jishi* [Tombstone: Records of China’s great famine of the 1960s] (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu, 2008).

people in stricken areas to remain loyal to the state as long as it provided relief, but it was primarily officials and rulers who were called to both practical and ritual action during a major calamity. During the Yellow River flood Chinese newspapers occasionally called on young male flood refugees to enter the military to fight against Japan, but for the most part flood refugees were depicted as admirable but largely passive sufferers. For the Chinese Communists, on the other hand, mobilizing, as well as feeding the rural masses was crucial. According to Maoist ideology, writes Lillian Li, unequal distribution of wealth rather than technological backwardness was the root cause of poverty, so awakening class consciousness and harnessing the power of the peasantry was seen as the surest route to a strong new China.¹²⁰ Hence the Party's contempt for the Guomindang's decision to use flooding instead of "the power of the masses" to defend China from invaders. Yet only a decade after denouncing the Guomindang for ignoring the people's interests by causing the flood, the Maoist state would mobilize China's rural population on such a massive scale and in such a coercive manner that the country would undergo the most lethal famine in both Chinese and world history. The valorization of sacrificing one's life or well-being for the nation that ran throughout discussions of the Yellow River flood, as well as the rejection of the long-held belief that disasters were Heaven's way of warning those in leadership positions to examine their actions and change course, helps to contextualize state responses (or lack thereof) to both catastrophes.

¹²⁰ Lillian Li: 2007, 342.