

BOOK REVIEW

The People's West Lake: Propaganda, Nature, and Agency in Mao's China, 1949–1976

Qiliang He. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023. xii + 201 pp. \$28.00 (pbk). ISBN 9780824895594

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*Beside West Lake did Mao Zedong
A statist people's park decree...*

One cannot read Qiliang He's *The People's West Lake* without thinking of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." This stimulating little book shows what can happen when a despot, or at least a despotic regime, decrees a modification of the physical environment.

As soon as the Communist Party controlled West Lake, they began thinking of ways to engineer it. He's five chapters analyse projects intended to 1) dredge the lake and increase its capacity, 2) build a park that would provide recreation for workers and show off the New China to foreign leaders, 3) reforest barren hills to the west of the Lake, 4) encourage local peasants to raise more pigs and provide manure for nearby farms, and 5) remove tombs of historic and legendary figures lest they promote "superstitious" activities by visitors. Each of these best-laid schemes, which He calls "propaganda-campaign projects," ran up against the "recalcitrant" agency of human and non-human actors, leading to outcomes that differed – sometimes creatively and sometimes disastrously – from the planners' visions and directions.

To appreciate *The People's West Lake*, one must first get past some minor annoyances. Editing is sloppy – romanizations don't match Chinese characters, translations are often awkward, and words are used inappropriately. More seriously, half the introduction is a literature review more fitting for a doctoral qualifying exam than for a published monograph, ticking off notions and concepts that the author does not use in his argument. But if we put aside our frustrations at incomplete editing, we can appreciate the insights that *People's West Lake* offers us about the danger of trying to apply simplified plans to complex social-ecological systems. The first two chapters illustrate this lesson clearly.

Chapter one shows how a well-intended programme to dredge West Lake turned into a perfect clown show of unintended consequences. Planned naïvely and executed haphazardly, it turned out disastrously. Knowing that the lake had been neglected during at least the 12 years of war that preceded the PRC founding, authorities reasoned that dredging would beautify the lake, clarify its water, store water for irrigation in dry times, control floods in wet times, and provide dredged muck as fertilizer. The dredging started in 1952, and immediately things went wrong. There was not enough equipment, there were not enough workers, and those who were recruited often failed to show up. There was no good place to put the dredged sediment, so it was often dumped thickly on nearby fields, negatively affecting both agricultural productivity and peasant livelihoods. In 1955, a dry year in the region, farmers drew off so much water that the lake bottom was exposed (despite its having been deepened by previous dredging) and salt water intruded. In 1958,

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something – maybe sewage from nearby hotels – nourished organisms that turned the lake a weird colour, a sort of inland “red tide.” Re-introducing some organisms extirpated by the dredging project helped a little, but the project was called off in 1959, not surprisingly proclaimed a success in official media.

He’s detailed analysis of the dredging project convincingly demonstrates that a plan to alter a complex ecosystem can produce horribly sideways results. He also argues, at least suggestively, that the propaganda purpose of the project – showing that the new regime was competent to fix old problems and that socialism was a superior system for managing environment and society – contributed to the disarray and ultimate failure. This may well be true, but lakes are really tricky, full of poorly understood non-human agents, and have proved recalcitrant to plans to de-eutrophy them under many social systems, including the hybrid state-capitalism of today’s China. Still, He convinces us that the hubris of the early socialist state was completely unfounded – state socialism was not superior, just arrogant.

In the case of the people’s park, called “Watching Fish at the Flower Harbor” (*Huagang guan yu gongyuan*) human agents were more important in counteracting state plans. The background and rationale for the park were complex. Hangzhou was originally a partial exception to the Communist project of changing China’s cities from places of exploitative consumption to places of industrial production. Following Soviet precedent, Party leaders committed themselves to providing places for The People (the working classes) to enjoy clean, wholesome outdoor recreation, and they also wanted to build aesthetically pleasing environments to show off the virtues of the New China to important foreigners. So they built the park according to a kind of hybrid design including not only the winding paths and strange rocks of Jiangnan’s gentry gardens, but also the broad lawns of European and American city parks, expecting that the lawns would be places of picnicking and games as they might be in Paris or San Francisco.

But The People had other ideas. The sun was hot in the muggy Jiangnan summers, so visitors avoided the lawns. Young couples also used the park at night for dating and trysting, activities the puritanical Party was ambivalent about – they wanted China’s new generation to discard arranged marriages and embrace free choice, but they opposed premarital sex. And when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, radicals condemned leisure in general – it got in the way of revolutionary activity – so the park suffered neglect.

The park was not a debacle like the newly dredged lake, but the agency of the subalterns (the workers for whom it was ostensibly built) turned it into a very different place from what its planners had imagined. Its propagandistic intentions were, however, not entirely frustrated – by the time Richard Nixon visited China in spring 1972, the park was in good enough shape for Zhou Enlai to accompany him there.

The following three chapters, on forestation, pig-raising and tomb-removal, further illustrate He’s observation that schemes of environmental management, when made for propaganda purposes, often fail. But while He argues that it is the nature of “propaganda-campaign projects” that leads them astray when they encounter independent agents, his examples may actually have wider validity. It may be not so much the propagandistic nature of these schemes, but the very idea of managing ecosystems, that leads to unintended consequences. He may have inadvertently provided food for thought, not only to students of socialism and propaganda, but to those trying to understand how to, or at least how not to, manage natural environments.