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移山倒海

Removing Mountains and Draining Seas

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The expression ‘removing mountains and draining seas’ (*yi shan dao hai*) first appeared in the sixteenth-century classic novel *Journey to the West* to refer to the attitude one should adopt in the face of difficulties. Taken a little more literally, it encapsulates rather well the promethean attitude to nature—conceiving of the environment as a resource to fulfil human needs and interests—during the Mao years. It embodies a celebration of the capacity of humanity to overcome natural obstacles and mould the environment to its benefit. It goes hand in hand with a broadly adversarial disposition towards nature exemplified in the militaristic language often adopted during that period, involving humans conquering nature (*ren dingsheng tian*) or waging a ‘war’ against it.¹

At first glance, this vision of nature may seem completely at odds with the ethos of Xi Jinping’s ‘New Era’ (*xin shidai*). Upon visiting China today, one is struck by the frequent exhortations to ‘build an ecological civilisation’ (*shengtai wenming jianshe*) and equally frequent references in official speeches and policy documents to Xi’s statement that ‘clear waters and green mountains are as good as mountains of gold and silver.’² But are the Party-state’s approaches to nature in these two periods so radically at odds? In this essay, I will argue that the promethean attitude still continues into the present, even if it supports different representations of and engagements with nature.

Tracing the Changing Lives of ‘Removing Mountains and Draining Seas’

The ideology of ‘removing mountains and draining seas’ is rooted in a Confucian vision of nature at the service of humans. The various forms of environmental deterioration which result from this stance—including deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and soil erosion—have a similarly long history.³ Nonetheless, representations of nature promoted in Mao’s thought enhanced this promethean attitude towards the environment.

Reference to exemplary tales and local success stories became the ideological support structure for megaprojects aimed towards building a socialist paradise which, however, accelerated concomitant environmental degradation.⁴

An illustrative example is the tale of the ‘Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountains’ (*yugong yi shan*). Originally attributed to an ancient Daoist text, Mao reinterpreted this story in a famous 1945 speech in Yan’an, where he used it to refer to the metaphorical mountains of imperialism and feudalism which needed to be removed by the masses organised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). But this tale was also used to suggest that human will and perseverance can alter anything, even nature. It was promoted as part of a related propaganda campaign known as ‘In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai.’ Dazhai was the name of a production team in Shanxi province which was elevated to a national model in 1964 because of its success in turning infertile soil into productive land allegedly through sole reliance on the physical efforts of the farmers who cleared mountain land and created terraced fields.

A number of other campaigns were promoted in this spirit during the Mao period, including massive hydropower projects such as the Three Gorges Dam, plans for which began before the Mao era and continued well after its end; the backyard smelter campaign during the Great Leap Forward, designed to accelerate steel production; and sweeping deforestation and dredging to ‘open the wilderness to plant grain.’ Encouraging people to follow in the footsteps of the foolish old man who moved mountains, campaigns paid little attention to local topography and climate, following the conviction that with hard work and socialist spirit, anything could be achieved, despite any natural obstacles. The effects of these campaigns were mixed to say the least. In the case of efforts to intensify agriculture at all costs, for instance, the result was in some cases extreme soil depletion and deforestation without the intended growth in agricultural production.⁵

Following the death of Mao in 1976, the early reform period was characterised by a rather different ethos, with development and profit being prioritised at the expense of communitarian ideology. Indeed, Deng Xiaoping—who is often described as the architect of China’s social and economic reforms—is best known for the dictums ‘let some get rich first’ and ‘it doesn’t matter if the cat is black or white as long as it can catch the mice.’ Nevertheless, the utilitarian approach to the environment exemplified by ‘removing the mountains and draining the seas’ carried on with renewed vigour despite the ideological shift. Rural industrialisation—and particularly the creation of Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs)—was a key feature and encapsulates how the natural environment was treated in the early reform period.⁶ Although individually these TVEs were relatively small, taken collectively their development amounted to a megaproject rivalling those of the Mao era. Given that profit considerations determined investment in industrial infrastructure and methods of mining and processing, longer-term environmental impacts were substantial.⁷ However, due to the fragmented nature of rural industrialisation and the short-term horizon implicit in the immediate profit orientation of the TVEs, these impacts are difficult to measure.

The grave environmental consequences of this development model soon became apparent and the early reform mindset—‘pollute now, clean up later’ (*xian wuran hou zhili*)—came under growing scrutiny. Since the late 1970s, concerns about preserving the natural environment—rather than exploiting it—began to take shape, and China’s government developed a growing body of environmental protection policies and

legislation.⁸ However, megaprojects led by a promethean spirit have continued into the late reform period, including the South-to-North Water Transfer, a massive project first conceived during the Mao era and still ongoing which is intended to divert over 40 billion cubic meters of fresh water through three separate routes from southern rivers into the notoriously arid northern China.

Under the leadership of Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji (1998–2003) a campaign to ‘Develop the West’ was promoted in order to tackle regional differences between the eastern seaboard and the less-developed western interior.⁹ This includes massive projects which are, in some cases, the literal manifestation of ‘removing the mountains and draining the seas’ in terms of their intended reach and effects. Some of these projects are directed towards preserving, restoring, or even creating ecological environments—such as reforestation and the establishment of ecocities—alongside others which are much less about natural protection than about industrialisation and infrastructure development.

Many of these projects have tended to prioritise economic gain over a slower and more sustainable version of development. This is particularly the case in historically poor regions where local governments depend on polluting firms to raise tax revenue necessary to support public services and villagers rely heavily on them for employment.¹⁰

While under the leadership of Jiang and Zhu the focus remained on relatively unbridled economic development, the tide began to change with the ascendance in 2003 of the subsequent administration, led by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. They made Scientific Development (*kexue fazhan*) and Harmonious Society (*hexie shehui*) the cornerstones of their leadership, and emphasised the need to build an ‘ecological civilisation.’

The concern to protect the natural environment was further expanded by Xi Jinping who has made ecological civilisation a leading principle for his vision of a ‘New Era.’ In a similar spirit, and in recognition of the gravity of China’s environmental situation, at the opening of the annual session of the National People’s Congress in March 2014 Chinese Premier Li Keqiang stated that China would declare ‘a war on pollution.’ The difference between Mao’s war against nature and the current war against pollution is striking, of course, but it is significant that in both cases a militaristic language convergent with the ethos of ‘removing the mountains and draining the seas’ is employed in approaching the environment.

Just as during previous leadership periods, less developed areas (particularly in China’s interior) have continued to feel the pressure to catch up with the rest. For instance, in Langzhong county, Sichuan province, where I lived in 2004–05 and which I visited frequently since, a new ‘development zone’ was established in the early 2010s to further expand infrastructure and boost the local economy. This included building new roads and a new railway line and station, as well as providing space for investors to open businesses. Much of this area was hilly, and in order to create the new development zone many hills were literally removed, making parts of the landscape unrecognisable. In the words of an elderly villager which uncannily resemble the Maoist promethean spirit, ‘opening and developing mountains’ (*kai fa shan*) was an important resource for the local economy, particularly because hill land is less valuable than prime agricultural land and therefore cheaper to compensate. This anecdote illustrates a situation that is unfolding across much of rural China as it urbanises at breakneck speed. For all the

emphasis on environmental protection, the allure of economic development remains alive and well in poorer areas. Conversely, removing mountains to enable development is no foolish endeavour, just as Mao maintained.

A New Era for the Environment?

If we take the expression ‘removing mountains and draining seas’ literally—to mean exploitation of nature with no regard for the consequences—then there are clear signs in rhetoric and policy under Xi that this approach is no longer applicable. Humans are not seen as entirely separate from nature, there is an emphasis on harmony between them, and the language of warfare is reserved for pollution rather than nature *per se*. However, if we take it to stand for megaprojects and prometheanism, various examples come to mind that betray an attitude to the natural environment led by a vision in which humans are at the centre and nature serves as nothing more than a resource. For instance, the Belt and Road Initiative, embraced with vigour in recent years, is a development strategy to build infrastructure connecting China and its neighbours and involves, among other things, resource extraction and the development of new coal power plants outside of China’s borders. China’s renewed push to urbanise is one of the fastest in human history, and the functional zoning at the heart of integrated rural-urban planning protects certain areas while targeting others as objects of exploitation. The ongoing campaign to develop the western areas of the country involves plans to extract resources from China’s interior. Hydropower projects may be construed as efforts to protect the environment by reducing reliance on coal, but they may also negatively impact biodiversity. Most representative of the enduring promethean ethos of the current leadership are weather modification and geoengineering projects, whereby the weather itself becomes an object of intervention and human innovation.

Crucially, the extent to which the increasing attention to the natural environment under Xi trickles down to localities, especially poor and remote localities which regard development at all costs as desirable, will not be equal everywhere. The notorious implementation gap, whereby central government policies and national laws are often not well enforced in the localities is likely to be addressed in different ways and to different extents in different parts of the country.¹¹ This may result in reinforcing existing environmental and social inequalities between regions and between rural and urban areas.¹²

While the balance overall may be shifting in favour of more emphasis on nature protection, this is likely to affect some regions more than others—as the principle behind functional zoning suggests—and could well result in the safeguarding of areas designated as national parks while mineral-rich areas are subject to ongoing exploitation. Rural areas are under contradictory pressure to perform as an ecological resource and as a resource for extraction and industrialisation.¹³ In conclusion, the question is not so much whether the promethean ethos of ‘removing the mountains and draining the seas’ is still applicable but rather *where* it is applicable and *in what guises*.

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