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Thirsty Dragon Prepares for the Olympics

Dai Qing

The picture on this page was taken by a People's Pictorial photographer in 1953. The sixty-year-old Mao Zedong had just finished writing a calligraphic inscription that read "Celebrate the successful completion of the Guanting Reservoir Project." The man sitting next to him was my father-in-law, Wang Sen, the project manager for the dam.

Mao and Wang Sen in 1953

The photograph was probably published in some newspaper or other around that time. Even if I'd seen it, I wouldn't have paid any attention to it. I certainly never imagined that fifteen years later I'd marry the project manager's son, Wang Dejia, thereby becoming the daughter-in-law of a man once shown relaxing on the bank of the dam, chatting and laughing with the "Great Leader."

The first time I saw this photograph was in 1968, during the Cultural Revolution. I found it at the bottom of a pile of discarded documents beneath some quilts. At that time most people would treasure a picture taken with Mao as if it were a family heirloom, a talismanic charm, something to be carefully framed and hung in a prominent place at home. They prized such things even though in the picture they themselves might only have a head the size of a pea.

I shouted out with surprise: "When was this picture of you with Chairman Mao taken?" My father-in-law was sitting holding his favorite deck of cards—they were so worn that only he could tell them apart. He looked up but said nothing. My husband, Dejia, didn't say a word either. It was obvious that neither of them wanted to see the thing brought out for display. Only many years later did Dejia tell me that his father—a man who had overseen the building of a number of major dams and who "struggled throughout his life for the Party's cause"—once whispered to him, "Build a dam, bleed a river dry." By then it was the late 1980s and I myself was involved with an environmental group opposed to the Three Gorges Dam being planned for the Yangtze River. My environmental group was investigating what had happened to the earlier Sanmen Gorge Dam Project on the Yellow River, and we had publicly started lobbying to protect China's rivers and water sources.

I didn't ask Dejia when his father had made the remark. Even if it wasn't as early as 1968, the year I discovered that old photograph, he must have been thinking along those lines by then. China had been through the calamitous famine created by the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s. One of the slogans of the Great Leap had encouraged people everywhere to "put maximum effort into building hydrology projects." As a result, cadres—or officials—in the People's Communes had ordered the construction of countless small dams. The wild enthusiasm of the "Great Leap into communism" passed, leaving disaster, agricultural dislocation, and mass starvation in its wake. Unstable embankments and leaking dams littered the countryside.

By the late 1960s, the Ministry of Hydrology in which my father-in-law had worked was preoccupied with the overwhelming task of trying to deal with the ongoing ecological disaster created by the Great Leap. Even my father-in-law's hometown in Jixian County, Hebei province, had been devastated. His village had been submerged when they dammed the Jizhou River to create the Yuqiao Reservoir, less than one hundred kilometers from the Guanting Reservoir. The inhabitants of 141 villages had been resettled during the building of that project. There probably wouldn't have been any complaints if the dam had really benefited local farmers.

But as was the case with so many grandiose dam-building projects, the local cadres behind the Yuqiao Reservoir had failed to ascertain the geological makeup of the area. The two-kilometer-long dam was built on sandy soil. Within a few years water was seeping out to create a vast marshland downstream. The result was the destruction of 50,000 acres of land that had provided food for the population of nearly one million people in the six major counties downstream. What was left, so Dejia told me, was a bumpy moonscape that could no longer support agriculture of any consequence. The farmers had long since been forced to leave their homes, but they snuck back to their ruined towns and eked out a living, harvesting only a fraction of the food they used to produce. To this day those villagers are still on state welfare.

Meanwhile, the authorities in Beijing are preparing for the competitors and visitors who will descend on the Chinese capital next August for the 2008 Olympics. Unprecedented efforts have gone into transforming the city. Of course, international audiences will mostly be concerned with who jumps the highest or runs the fastest. But Beijing, the capital of a "rapidly rising" China, is anxious to show off its architectural magnificence: the grand Olympic Stadium (the "Nest"), the "Water Cube" built for swimming events, all the new luxury hotels, the Rem Koolhaas–designed China Central TV building, and the multilane ring roads around the city.

While the farmers living on the outskirts of greater Beijing are given strictly controlled allocations of water, in central Beijing the people in charge are celebrating the construction of the ultimate "water follies" which will be ready in time for the Olympic year. These include the vast lake that will surround the titanium, egg-shaped National Grand Theater next to the Great Hall of the People, just off Tiananmen Square, as well as the largest fountain in the world at the Shunyi "Water Heaven"—one that can shoot 134 meters high. The Shunyi water park has been built on the dried-out remains of the Chaobai River—no irony intended. And then there are the hundred golf courses that have been laid out in greater Beijing. These infamous "water guzzlers" occupy over 20,000 acres of land and their imported turf has become a serious drain on the city's dwindling water resources.

Perhaps if this spectacle had been held three hundred years ago, or even a hundred years ago, the environment of Beijing might have been able to sustain it. After all, the city is surrounded by mountains on three sides, has five major water sources, and once had numerous lakes and marshes with underground springs constantly welling up and disgorging crystal-clear water. It was a rich and fertile place, and was home to five imperial capitals. But today Beijing is entirely different. Its reservoirs are 90 percent dry, and all of its rivers flow at historically low levels. The aquifer under Beijing has been drastically lowered by long-term overuse.

Is all of this just because of climate change? Certainly the city has been afflicted by drought for the past eight years, but the problems are more fundamental. Since 1949, the Beijing metropolitan area has experienced an eightfold population increase (growing from 2.2 million in 1948 to 18 million today). The city itself covers a geographic area that is fifty times larger, and uses thirty-five times as much water. Even the consumption of whiskey has increased one-hundred-fold in recent years. And what of the city's water, that precious commodity without which no one—young or old, rich or poor—can survive? On average, Beijing people have only three hundred cubic meters of water resources per capita, one eighth of the Chinese average—which is 2,200 cubic meters — and one thirtieth of the world average.

But during the Olympic Games, Beijing will enjoy an unprecedented supply of water. Special pipes will bring unpolluted water from the provinces to provide for the whole city, allowing people to enjoy potable water from their taps for the first time—but only for as long as the games last. Meanwhile, when the crowds watch and applaud the Olympic performances at the aquatic events, neither they nor the athletes will be aware that they are not really competing on the waters of Beijing's original Chaobai River. The "river" they will be using is an artificial creation made by damming the two ends of a long-dry riverbed and filling it with water pumped from deep underground.

After the Olympics, what then? The quest of Mao Zedong and his fellow Communist leaders to conquer nature led to the widespread razing of forests, the destruction of grasslands, the conversion of wetlands to farms, and the incessant damming of rivers. The heedless and unaccountable use of natural resources in more recent decades has led poor Beijing to the desperate state it is in today. My father-in-law's warning was prescient: the Guanting Reservoir for which Mao wrote his inscription in 1953 was China's first large reservoir, storing four billion cubic meters. For four decades it was Beijing's main source of drinking water. Today it is three-quarters empty and has not supplied Beijing with water for ten years. The Miyun Reservoir, Beijing's other lifeline on the Chaobai River, today operates at a tenth of its original capacity, supplying Beijing with only a tenth of its current water needs.

To make up for the dramatic water shortage, Beijing for the moment "mines" 80 percent of its water supply from its underground aquifer. But it is doing so at a rate faster than the aquifer can be replenished, causing the water table beneath the capital to drop precipitously and the land to subside in a two-thousand-square-kilometer "funnel." The balance of the city's water is being piped in from increasingly resentful neighboring provinces, such as Hebei and Shanxi. How will the city's insatiable thirst be satisfied in the future?

China's new rich and the financial capital controlled by the party-state bureaucracy are expanding into the world market at an alarming rate. While they have created previously unknown wealth, it is a wealth made possible by the avaricious consumption of natural resources. Today, some people of conscience have begun to speak out about what is happening and the dangers ahead. But these voices of concern and protest among China's citizens are rarely heard, and are weak at best. Although I am still based in Beijing, my own writings have been banned in China for many years.

The writer Lu Xun, who died in 1936, likened China to an iron room. He described a terrifying situation:

> Suppose there were an iron room with no windows or doors, a room it would be virtually impossible to break out of. And suppose you had some people inside that room who were sound asleep. Before long they would all suffocate. In other words, they would slip peacefully from a deep slumber into oblivion, spared the anguish of being conscious of their impending doom. Now let's say that you came along and stirred up a big racket that awakened some of the lighter sleepers. In that case, they would go to a certain death fully conscious of what was going to happen to them. Would you say that you had done those people a favor?[*]

Lu Xun called the China of the past "voiceless China." But China is now part of the global community, and we all face the decision about what we should do about our shared iron room. Moreover, there is another, more fragile China that truly has no voice: the natural environment. The fertile plains, the mineral wealth of the nation, the mighty forests, and the vast waterways—they are silently dying. This is the silence of China today. It is a silence that speaks of the grave.

The second-century-BCE Confucian philosopher Xunzi said, "The people are the water [in a river], the ruler a boat. The water can keep the boat afloat, the water can also capsize it." His metaphor described the relationship between the ruler and the will of the ruled. It took for granted the presence and the abundance of water. But if the actual water has been polluted and the rivers bled dry, a new metaphor is needed, one that will reflect China's looming environmental catastrophe.

—Translated from the Chinese by Geremie R. Barmé

Notes

[*] Lu Xun, Diary of a Madman and Other Stories, translated by William A. Lyell (University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 27.

Dai Qing is a writer and an activist who has long fought the Three Gorge dam project.

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