

The Forgotten Floods:
Examining the Consequences of the Yellow River Disaster, 1938-1947

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Abstract

This paper examines the shortcomings of Western academia's coverage of the Guomintang's decision to breach the Yellow River dikes in 1938. The catastrophe is discussed in individual segments by many in Western academia and lacks a comprehensive view of the event, which this paper will provide. Flood waters inundated the plains of the Henan, Anhui, and Kiangsu provinces, killing hundreds of thousands of people, and creating a massive refugee crisis. The lack of arable land and labor, the damaged agricultural infrastructure, and a major drought led to the Henan Famine of 1942-1943 which killed millions more. After Japan's surrender in 1945, considerable effort was made to plug the breach with substantial international support in the form of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. The repair effort was steeped in politics as a civil war between the Guomintang and the Communists erupted. When the breach was repaired, it flooded refugee settlements relocated into the old riverbed. Frustrated with how they had been treated, the people of northern China assisted the communists in their defeat of Chiang Kai-shek's regime. This research consisted of primary and secondary source material that was available through online archives. The United Nations archives were utilized to acquire the monthly reports regarding the repair of the breach. Included in the study is a report from the Chief Engineer of the repair which contained a map of the flooded areas. To supplement these sources, newspaper and magazine articles were obtained from the ProQuest Historical Newspapers archive.

Common Acronyms

UNRRA: United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

GMD: Guomindang or Chinese Nationalist Party

CNRRA: Chinese National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

CLARA: Chinese Liberated Areas Relief Association

Introduction

Japan's invasion of China in 1937 marked the start of a long and brutal war that lasted for eight years. It was only ended by the brutal use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the USSR breaking the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact by invading Manchuria. These dramatic events prompted Emperor Hirohito to finally agree to a complete surrender of Japan. Along the way, there were many tragedies on the Eastern Front, including the Rape of Nanjing, the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the fire bombings of Tokyo (1944-1945), and the Sandakan Death Marches (1942-1945) but one event in particular has been glossed over by Western academia for decades: the intentional flooding of the Yellow River.

In a desperate effort to halt the Japanese army from reaching the temporary capital setup in modern day Wuhan, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Guomindang otherwise known as the Nationalist Party (GMD), that had united China just ten years prior, ordered the breaching of the dikes that contained the Yellow River. The river poured out and bought the GMD five months of time to move the government to Chungking but it also devastated the countryside for eight years. The citizens were caught off guard by the overflowing river and hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed, with millions more becoming refugees within days. The situation only grew worse as the war with Japan prevented any real effort of plugging the breach until fighting had stopped. Henan was particularly impacted as the floods created ideal conditions for a famine which from 1942-1943 killed several million people. Refugees fled in droves, but the GMD could hardly support them as they struggled to resist the Japanese army.

While World War II raged on, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) slowly gained strength in Northern China, setting the stage for a civil war. When Japan finally surrendered in 1945, plans had already been developed by the newly formed United Nations Relief and

Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and the GMD to repair the damage to the dikes and tame the Yellow River. The CCP agreed to participate at first, but no amount of mediation could keep the GMD and CCP from fighting. The civil war was tied intimately to the Yellow River Project as a propaganda battle was fought over who was to blame and what should happen to the refugees who had moved into the northern riverbed, an issue that was never truly resolved. Chiang launched the “Strong Point Offensive” in January 1947, hoping to end the civil war but severely miscalculated the reaction from the people of northern China. The closing of the breach in March, and subsequent flooding of the people living in and around the northern riverbed, angered many in the North who would later help CCP forces defeat Chiang’s main army. Capitalizing on this victory, the CCP continued to march south until the GMD fled to Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China was established.

The flooding of the Yellow River had consequences that branched out like tributaries, culminating into the CCP seizing power. All of these events are connected and feed off of one another but Western academia largely focuses on particular aspects of the disaster, instead of capturing the totality of this monumental event. It is not enough to talk about the casualties caused by the flooding when millions more died in the famine it later caused. It is not enough to discuss the Henan Famine when the flooding and the famine contributed greatly to the GMD’s downfall. It is not enough to focus exclusively on the civil war and ignore how the floods and famine drove the citizens of China into the CCP’s arms. Through examining the web of consequences that breaching the Yellow River dike had, it becomes clear that the breach completely reshaped Chinese history and deserves to be viewed through that lens.

Methodology

I have analyzed UNRRA monthly reports, The UNRRA's Chief Engineer, O.J. Todd's maps and reports, and English language newspaper articles from China, Japan, and the United States. The UNRRA reports give insight into the political issues that afflicted the repair effort. They were only one side of the story, but a particularly insightful one as they give details on conversations between officials of the CCP, UNRRA, and GMD. The mission in China was not restricted to just the Yellow River Project so these reports provide economic data, political analysis, military analysis, and portray the general attitude of UNRRA officials to the Chinese National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (CNRRA) and the Guomindang.

O.J. Todd's records from his mission to repair the dikes provides invaluable written accounts and maps of the area affected by the floods. Todd's expertise from working on the rivers and dikes in China for almost twenty years before World War II is helpful for determining what happened and where, but he shows clear bias by excluding anything that would be even remotely considered political from his work. In "The Yellow River Reharnessed," Todd details the Yellow River's history of flooding as well as the repair effort performed by the UNRRA.¹ He specifically does not mention why the flood occurred and only mentions the CNRRA twice throughout the twenty-page article and never mentions the CCP. To fill in this gap, I will supplement this with news articles from China and the United States, which shift from apolitical to clearly political. These articles provide key coverage of the politics and propaganda that was used during this tumultuous time.

Historiography

English language scholarly work on the Yellow River was largely absent until 2001 when Diana Lary published "Drowned Earth: The Strategic Breaching of the Yellow River Dike,

¹ Oliver J. Todd, "The Yellow River Reharnessed," *Geographical Review* 39, no. 1 (1949).

1938.”² Lary’s article concludes with a critique of Western academia for failing to study this event in detail.³ Lary later expanded on this topic in the chapter “The Waters Covered the Earth: China’s War-Induced Natural Disasters” of *War and State Terrorism: The United States, Japan, and the Asia Pacific in the Long Twentieth Century*” (2004), which expands slightly on how this catastrophe is also tied to the Henan Famine on 1942-1943.⁴ Since then, other scholars like Rana Mitter, Kathryn Edgerton Tarpley, and Micah Mucolino have emerged to largely agree with Lary, branching out slightly but never exploring the entirety of this event.

Lary’s article and chapter are remarkably similar, using much of the same language and research. “Drowned Earth” is focused exclusively on the breach while “The Waters Covered the Earth” analyzes the event in comparison to other acts of environmental warfare. One of the key purposes of each piece is simply to describe the event due to how little it had been written about at the time. The main difference between them is that “The Waters Covered the Earth” expands on the link to the Henan Famine of 1942-1943, but still only loosely linking the river’s role to the famine through the refugee crisis and the environmental damage it caused.⁵ Lary’s work provides insight into the strategic thinking that went into breaching the dike and how it was done.⁶ She also gives details on the casualties and refugees from the Second Historical Archives of China, which are inaccessible outside of China.⁷ These records are the only official attempt at counting

² Diana Lary, “Drowned Earth: The Strategic Breaching of the Yellow River Dyke, 1938,” *War in History* 8, no. 2 (2001): 207, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26013859>.

³ Lary, “Drowned Earth,” 207.

⁴ 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*, edited by Mark Selden and Alvin Y. So. War and Peace Library, Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004, 16.

⁵ Lary. “The Waters Covered the Earth,” 2004, 16.

⁶ Lary, “Drowned Earth,” 197-197.

⁷ Lary, “Drowned Earth,” 203.

the casualties but are heavily disputed as part of the propaganda battle that the GMD and CCP engaged in during the civil war between 1945 and 1949.⁸

Lary's contentions are supported by more recent scholarly work. Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, the author of "Between War and Water: Farmer, City, and State in China's Yellow River Flood of 1938–1947" tells the story of the plight of refugees and the immediate political consequences of the disaster.⁹ Micah Muscolino uses "Violence Against the People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China's Henan Province, 1938-1945" to further link the flooding and refugee crisis to the Henan Famine.¹⁰ This analysis drastically alters the casualty estimates from hundreds of thousands to millions when including the famine. Where the sources start to differ is that Lary tends to view the repair effort as a success while further research has shown that it was full of infighting and strife between the UNRRA and the GMD. Authors like Rana Mitter in *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945* and "Imperialism, Transnationalism, and the Reconstruction of Post-war China: UNRRA in China 1944-7" describes some of the issues that plagued the repair and reveal stark ideological differences that further eroded the western powers support for the GMD.¹¹ Edgerton-Tarpley also contributes "A River Runs through It: The Yellow River and The Chinese Civil War, 1946–1947," which delves deep into how the propaganda battle was waged over the Yellow River and how that turned the tide of the civil war in favor of the CCP.¹² These works are all excellent at exploring certain

⁸ Lary, "Drowned Earth," 205.

⁹ Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, "Between War and Water: Farmer, City, and State in China's Yellow River Flood of 1938–1947," *Agricultural History* 90, no. 1 (2016): 94-116, doi:10.3098/ah.2016.090.1.94.;

¹⁰ Micah S. Muscolino, "Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China's Henan Province, 1938-1945," *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 291-311.

¹¹ Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945*, First U.S. edition, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013; Rana Mitter, "Imperialism, Transnationalism, and the Reconstruction of Post-war China: UNRRA in China, 1944-7," *Past & Present* 218, no. 218 (2013): 51-69.

¹² Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, "A River Runs through It: The Yellow River and The Chinese Civil War, 1946–1947," *Social Science History* 41, no. 2 (2017): 141-73. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90017906>.

aspects of the flood but all of them limit themselves with arbitrary cutoff dates or by focusing exclusively on one aspect. The breaching of the Yellow River is still relevant today and a comprehensive examination of the event and its consequences are needed.

Background

The Yellow River is known as the “Cradle of Chinese Civilization” for it runs through heart of the country and is used to irrigate the plains that feed millions.¹³ It has another identity as well that highlights the dual roles of the river: China’s Sorrow. The Yellow River is a wildly unpredictable force of nature that for centuries has been tied to governmental legitimacy. When the dikes were not maintained and a major flood occurred, the Yellow River acted as a harbinger of a regime change. Any change in the river’s course had an overarching effect on the whole nation, and the flooding in 1938 is certainly no exception to the rule. Chiang Kai-shek was well aware of this and initially did invest in maintaining the dike system when he and the GMD came to power in 1928, even while throwing most of the nation’s other resources towards fighting the CCP. Eventually, the threat of Japan was too great, and the bitter rivals forged an uneasy alliance to fight Japan over any further territorial gains.

War started with Japan after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on July 7, 1937, when the Japanese demanded to be able to search for a missing soldier inside the Chinese town of Wanping, which the Chinese refused.¹⁴ A small skirmish broke out and both the Japanese and Chinese governments used it to stoke up nationalism. Eventually, the Japanese invaded, rapidly taking most of the coast and, shortly thereafter, the capital of Nanjing by December 1937. The GMD setup a new capital in present day Wuhan, but it was not long before that too was under threat. Chiang Kai-shek decided that the dike system containing the Yellow River could be

¹³ Lary, "Drowned Earth," 192.

¹⁴ Mitter, *Forgotten Ally* 80.

breached to “use water as a substitute for soldiers.”¹⁵ On June 9, 1938, GMD soldiers worked with shovels and pickaxes to breach the dikes near Huayankou, a small Chinese town in Henan, unleashing environmental warfare on the Japanese soldiers, but more so on the unsuspecting Chinese citizens in the river’s wake.¹⁶ Waters poured out of the breach and decimated the Henan region before moving into Anhui and, finally, Jiangsu where it reached the Grand Canal that mercifully poured into the ocean (Figure 1).

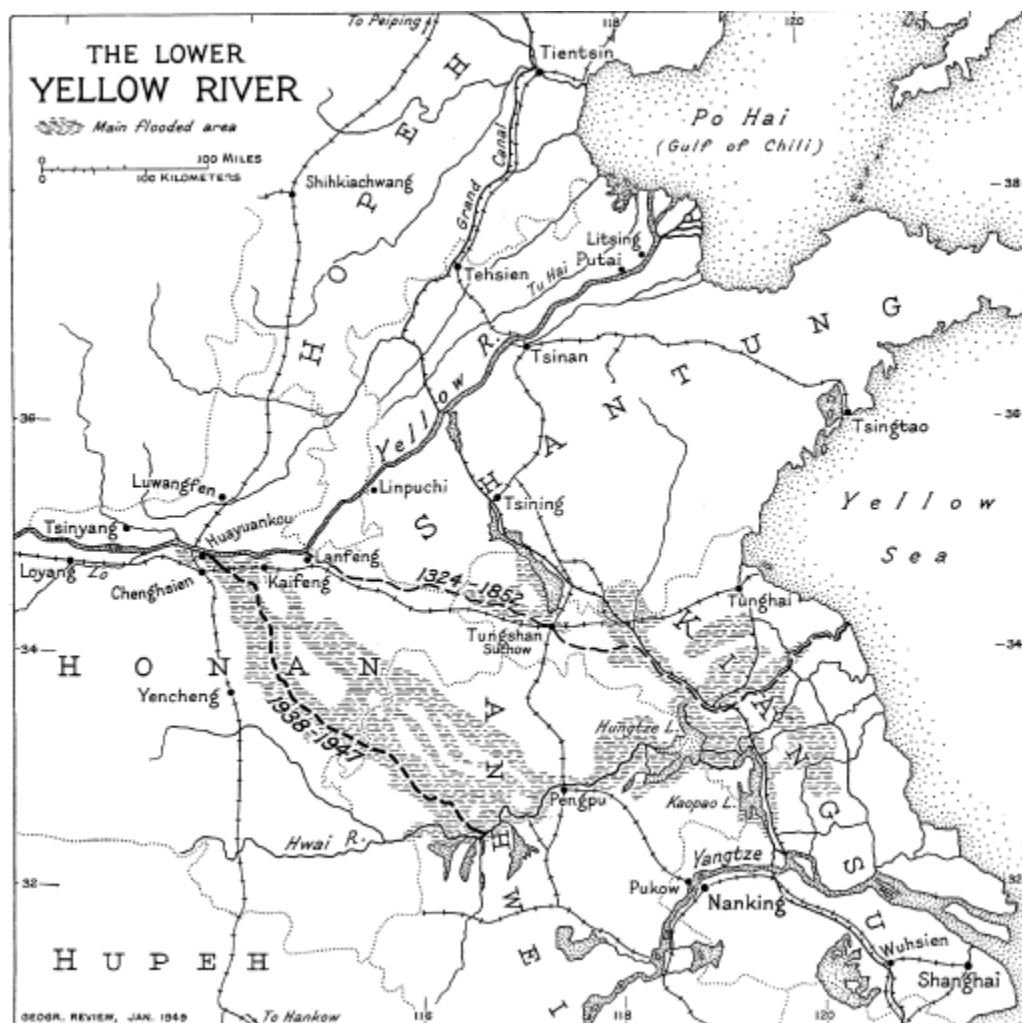


Figure 1: The shaded areas indicate the flooding caused by the breach.¹⁷

¹⁵ Diana Lary, *China's Republic*, New Approaches to Asian History, Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 120.

¹⁶ Lary, "Drowned Earth," 199.

¹⁷ Todd, "The Yellow River Reharnessed," 39.

The GMD made a choice not to warn the villages and towns that the river banks would soon wash away, hoping instead to maintain the element of surprise against the Japanese soldiers. Ultimately, the decision to not warn the citizens of the incoming floods might not have been one out of malice, but instead it may have partially been due to a lack of communication technology in the area as radios and telegram poles were not widespread at the time.¹⁸ Either way, no attempt was made. Seeing as how the GMD hoped to blame Japan for the catastrophe and providing a warning would have tipped their hand, it would seem to be that Chiang viewed the peasants of China as fodder to maintain his power, which I will expand upon later in this paper. Immediately after the breach, the GMD made a short film of soldiers pretending to try and close the gap after a Japanese bomber flew by the area.¹⁹ Between this and the massacre in Nanjing in 1937, the GMD hoped to drum up international support and pressure against Japan. The problem was that it was not believable that Japan would jeopardize their own military objectives by flooding the easiest route to the GMD's capital. The international community might have been sympathetic to China because of the Japanese military's appalling actions in other areas of China, but within months it was widely understood that Japan was not responsible for the floods.²⁰

The flood waters followed a predictable course but because there was no warning, it still resulted in horrendous casualties. Just how many died is a matter of debate. During the war, the GMD estimated that twelve million people were affected by the flood.²¹ The flooded area was contested territory so obtaining accurate numbers ranged from difficult to impossible.

Regardless, the GMD used this as part of a propaganda effort to show the sacrifice that Chinese

¹⁸ Lary, "Drowned Earth," 204

¹⁹ Lary, "Drowned Earth," 199.

²⁰ Frank Oliver, *Special Undeclared War*, London: J. Cape, 1939, 208.

²¹ Lary, "Drowned Earth," 202.

people were enduring to stop Japan. After the war, in 1948, they updated the number of casualties to 846,000; however, this number is disputed.²² The CCP released figures in 1952 that put the death toll at 470,000 but upped that number in 1972 to almost 900,000, which was more of an attack on the GMD than a reasonable estimate.²³ Many contemporary scholars believe that the total was likely closer to 400,000, still a horrendous loss of life but not as catastrophic. Steven Dutch, however, uses two studies on predicting flood casualties to prove that the original estimate from 1948 is plausible.²⁴ The truth is that we will never know the full extent of the Yellow River's destruction due to a lack of primary sources but even the most conservative of estimates make this a remarkable tragedy.

World War II created hordes of refugees worldwide but no single action created a refugee crisis like breaching the Yellow River dikes. Millions of people were left without homes as entire villages were destroyed by the seemingly endless waters.²⁵ The flooding continued for eight and a half years, and while the people tried to adapt to the new course, it was a daunting task. Most chose to leave the area, either moving into the old riverbed, or fleeing to the west, hoping for some kind of relief from the GMD. They were met by a cold and calculating government that consistently tried to use the catastrophe to their advantage. The GMD and CCP operated press opted to refer to refugees as "refugee compatriots or disaster victim compatriots" and viewed their sacrifice as "a sacrifice borne for the nation."²⁶ Many refugees were relocated to serve as labor for the massive farms that were required to feed the rapidly growing population in the new

²² Steven I. Dutch, "The Largest Act of Environmental Warfare in History," *Environmental & Engineering Geoscience* 15, no. 4 (2009): 293.

²³ China Tames Her Rivers, 第一版.; Di 1 Ban. Ed, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972.

²⁴ Dutch, "The Largest Act of Environmental Warfare," 294.

²⁵ Muscolino, "Violence Against People and the Land," 295.

²⁶ Edgerton-Tarpley, "Between War and Water," 107.

capital of Chongqing or conscripted into military service.²⁷ However, the refugees who tried to stay in the flooded area were subjected to a far more deadly experience: famine.

Henan Famine

The Yellow River is historically an unpredictable river because, during the heavy flows of the summer, it drags massive silt deposits with it that raise the riverbed up, making the surrounding area more susceptible to flooding.²⁸ The dike system normally contained most of the silt to the main riverbed and was occasionally dredged to ensure the river was less of a flood risk. However, with virtually no government in effective control of the flooded area, the silt was no longer contained to just the riverbed, and overflowed into the surrounding farmland which then froze during the winter. Planting seeds in the spring became difficult, if not impossible, in the floodplains. O.J. Todd reported in 1949 that “nearly two million acres of good farmland...had been partly or entirely taken out of dependable production.”²⁹ The floods, originating in Henan, made the province the most susceptible to the destruction. As a result, the majority of refugees and deaths came from this region, but with no relief in sight, only more tragedy was coming. Many people left the area in search of food, not knowing that there was none to be found.

Henan, like many rural areas in China, relied on intricately and meticulously maintained man-made landscapes to maximize agricultural production with limited technology. The land is particularly flat so when the waters came, there were few places to hide, and much of the land was rendered useless. Micah Muscolino estimates that “flooding inundated 32 per cent of the fields in Eastern Henan and deposited approximately 100,000,000 tons of silt.”³⁰ What the water did not destroy, the silt rendered useless. To make matters worse, those lucky enough to avoid

²⁷ Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*, 180-182.

²⁸ Todd, "The Yellow River Reharnessed," 41.

²⁹ Todd, "The Yellow River Reharnessed," 40.

³⁰ Muscolino, "Violence Against People and the Land," 296.

the waters and flee were slowly trampling the land they had worked so hard to cultivate and were unable to provide the needed labor to help recover from the floods. This, combined with a particularly hot and dry period, as well as governmental policies from both Japan and the GMD, culminated in the Henan Famine of 1942-1943.

Henan suffered greatly during the war and received no respite from the weather. Despite the influx of water from the Yellow River, Henan began experiencing drought conditions beginning in 1938 and lasting until 1945.³¹ This was not particularly abnormal but could not have come at a worse time for the region. Already the usable farmland had been drastically reduced and what areas could be farmed suddenly found themselves in need of water. The drought had another important implication; the dried northern riverbed provided ideal breeding ground for locusts which would emerge in 1942, migrating south and ruining the crops in the fall 1942 and spring 1943.³² Conditions had become dire, and this did not happen in a vacuum, as the war with Japan was constantly draining supplies from the area. In 1940, a poor harvest prompted the GMD to establish a grain tax, something the Japanese were already doing in the section of Henan they nominally ruled, placing a greater burden on the peasantry of China.³³ Henan buckled under the pressure, resulting in a devastating famine.

The Henan famine is most famously described in English by the *Times Magazine* journalist, Theodore White:

[I saw] dogs eating human bodies by the roads, peasants seeking dead human flesh under the cover of darkness, endless deserted villages, beggars swarming at every city gate, babies abandoned to cry and die on every highway. Nothing can transmit the horror of the entire great famine in Honan [Henan] Province.³⁴

³¹ Anthony Garnaut, "A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 6 (2013): 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24494213>.

³² Muscolino, "Violence Against People and the Land," 300.

³³ Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*, " 266.

³⁴ Theodore White, "Until the Harvest Is Reaped." *Time*, March 22, 1943. 1, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,796097-1,00.html>.

Most estimates on the death toll of the famine are around three million, but there are no official records to verify this number.³⁵ Many more residents of the region fled the area on trains or on foot in search of food, or simply to escape the living nightmare of the time. Those who stayed could be enlisted by the GMD to attempt to repair new breaks in the Yellow River dike system or conscripted into the army.³⁶ Others, as White describes, found increasingly desperate ways to survive. Those who managed to survive these harrowing experiences were relieved in 1944 by a better crop yield spurred by moderate rains in 1943.³⁷ While drought conditions returned in 1944, 1945 brought an end to their torment as rain returned and Japan surrendered to the Allies.

Repair and Politics

In 1943, the tide began to turn in World War II as Germany's offensive in Russia failed and the United States began reversing Japan's gains in the Pacific. The Allies realized that they would need a plan to address the massive, global reconstruction effort required when the war ended. One organization that emerged from this idea was the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. The UNRRA was a global organization and contributed to the repair efforts in Europe, Africa, and Asia. One of its missions was to repair the dikes of the Yellow River and rehabilitate the inundated farmland. This project was of particular interest because it could increase the global food supply by "two million tons annually," which the famine-wracked people of China sorely needed.³⁸ By many measures, this mission can be viewed as a success as the repair was completed in a mere thirteen months. Beneath the surface, however, it was tied deeply to the civil war between the Chinese Communist Party and the

³⁵ Garnaut, "A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942," 2009.

³⁶ Muscolino, "Violence Against People and the Land," 301.

³⁷ Garnaut, "A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942," 2016.

³⁸ Todd, "The Yellow River Reharnessed," 40.

Guomindang that ended in 1949, was associated with GMD corruption, and undermined the United Nations and United States' reputation with the CCP.

By the end of World War II, the breach had expanded to be a mile wide, with many other parts of the dike system also dilapidated after of eight years without maintenance. The UNRRA knew that to tackle a repair of this magnitude they would need to rely on someone with extensive knowledge of the area. They chose O.J. Todd, an American who worked in China for years before the outbreak of war, studying the rivers, dikes, irrigation, and flood conditions.³⁹ While Todd was not publicly interested in the politics, his experience in the region made him a suitable candidate to work with GMD officials on the project. Massive amounts of labor were needed for the repair effort, so the UNRRA conscripted locals by paying them with imported grain distributed by the GMD's counterpart to the UNRRA, the Chinese National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (CNRRA).⁴⁰

Work began in early 1946 but immediately ran into transportation issues as the war with Japan and the Yellow River's floods had destroyed many roads, railways, and bridges.⁴¹ The mood was optimistic nonetheless as a ceasefire was signed on January 10, 1946, and even the so called "bandits" who operated in uncontrolled areas were cooperative with the CNRRA and UNRRA personnel.⁴² That optimism did not last long as it became clear that the ceasefire would not hold. By March, open warfare was underway, and some trends began to emerge. The first was that the transportation issue was going to be a consistent problem for operations. It was such an issue that CNRRA vehicles would travel with equipment to build temporary roads and bridges

³⁹ Oliver J. Todd, *Two Decades in China, Comprising Technical Papers, Magazine Articles, Newspaper Stories and Official Reports Connected with Work under His Own Observation*, Taipei: Ch'eng Wen Publ., 1971, 1-8.

⁴⁰ Todd, "The Yellow River Reharnessed," 54.

⁴¹ Benjamin H. Kizer, "Report No. 2 (January, 1946)," Letter to J. Franklin Ray, United Nations Archives, February 10, 1946, 9

⁴² Kizer, "Report No. 2," 19, 30.

to pass some areas before dismantling them after crossing so that they could be used again later on the trip.⁴³ That hints at another problem that plagued the CNRRA: complete disorganization.

Part of the problem was that the CNRRA was a newly formed organization that had not settled all of its leadership positions.⁴⁴ Other difficulties were related to a lack of training on the complex equipment, a lack of reliable communication methods, and labor shortages.⁴⁵ The CNRRA was meant to be an apolitical institution that only sought to assist any Chinese community in need, but that goal quickly deteriorated as the civil war went on. The UNRRA monthly reports all point out issues with deliveries to communist controlled territories until finally in December 1946 they blatantly called the CNRRA's distribution "discriminatory."⁴⁶ Finances were also a sore point between the organizations. The UNRRA provided vehicles, medical supplies, food, and other materials with specific stipulations on what could and could not be sold by the CNRRA. In May 1946, it was discovered that despite not having enough trucks to deliver supplies, the CNRRA was selling virtually any that the UNRRA supplied to pay off debts.⁴⁷ While vehicles were permitted to be sold, it was meant to be in instances of excess supplies, not to fund the agency. Food was specifically banned from being sold but in January 1947, they broke that rule as well.⁴⁸ Financial issues were not just limited to the CNRRA as the GMD struggled to keep the economy afloat while the civil war continued.

⁴³ Benjamin H. Kizer, "Report No. 3 (February, 1946)," Letter to J. Franklin Ray, United Nations Archives, March 20, 1946, 6a.

⁴⁴ Kizer, "Report No. 3," 2; Benjamin H. Kizer, "Report No. 4 (March, 1946)," Letter to J. Franklin Ray, United Nations Archives, April 25, 1946, 1.

⁴⁵ Kizer, "Report No. 3," 2-3; Kizer, "Report No. 4," 1-2.

⁴⁶ Franc Shor, "Report No.13 (December, 1946)," Letter to Col. Fred D. Harris, United Nations Archives, January 30, 1947, 3.

⁴⁷ J. Franklin Ray, "Report No. 6 (May, 1946)," Letter to Col. F. W. Harris, United Nations Archives, June 15, 1946, 13-14.

⁴⁸ Franc Shor, "Report No. 14 (January, 1947)," Letter to Alexander McIver, United Nations Archives, February 28, 1947, 1.

Despite these obstacles, the Yellow River Project continued to make progress until the CCP began to protest in March 1946. The issue at hand was that the northern riverbed in the Shantung province was now home to over one hundred villages and five hundred thousand people.⁴⁹ If work was to continue, the people would need to be compensated for their losses and relocated, and repairs to the dikes in Shantung needed to be completed before the main breach at Huayuankou was repaired. This was not necessarily new information as Todd had noted earlier in January that these would need to be repaired, but he had hoped it could be done simultaneously.⁵⁰ The problem was that so few supplies had been shipped by the CNRRA to Shantung that work was not progressing fast enough. Frustrated communist troops who felt that the river's return threatened their people acted independently to sabotage equipment and kidnap fifteen UNRRA workers near Huayuankou.⁵¹ While the CCP's top diplomat, Zhou Enlai, was able to assist in the workers' safe return, it was clear that resistance was building against the project.

In April the "Oral Agreement" was made between the Zhou Enlai, O.J. Todd, and Franklin Ray Jr., the Acting Director to the UNRRA's China Office, which would delay the breach closure until repairs were completed in Shantung.⁵² The lack of CNRRA and GMD representation is notable here as work continued on the main breach with the goal of beating the high-water season in late July. At the same time, the GMD initiated a blockade of all communist controlled ports, severely limiting the supplies that the UNRRA could provide to the dike workers in northern Henan and Shantung.⁵³ In preparation of the return of the Yellow River to its

⁴⁹ J. Franklin Ray, "Report No. 5 (April, 1946)," Letter to Col. F. W. Harris, United Nations Archives, May 18, 1946, 32.

⁵⁰ Kizer, "Report No. 2," 19.

⁵¹ Ray, "Report No. 6," 3.

⁵² Ray, "Report No. 6," Enclosure 1, 1.

⁵³ Ray, "Report No. 6," 3.

northern course, the CCP mobilized over 380,000 workers in Shantung to repair the dike system, despite not having the necessary supplies.⁵⁴ This mobilization effort showcased the CCP's ability to inspire the peasants of China and would be a tactic that they would use again to turn the tide of the civil war.

The valiant effort put forth to repair the Shantung dikes before the floods arrived was unsuccessful, but the northern Chinese were spared by early rains that stopped work on the main breach at Huayuankou.⁵⁵ Those in the path of the southern course would have to endure the river for another year. Negotiations between Zhou, the CNRRA, and the UNRRA reaffirmed the stance that residents in the northern riverbed would need to be compensated and relocated, with the GMD pledging fifteen billion yuan, the dominant currency in China, to that end.⁵⁶ To address the issue of supplies not reaching workers in communist controlled areas, Zhou requested formal representation in the CNRRA, a request that was quickly rejected. At this point, the UNRRA reports began to broadcast skepticism that cooperation between the GMD and CCP was possible and became far more critical of both the GMD and the CNRRA which included condemning GMD assassinations and CNRRA incompetence.⁵⁷ The civil war was intensifying into open warfare, and safety concerns were becoming a priority for the organization.

Work on the Yellow River Project was limited to maintenance of existing structures until the waters subsided in late October 1946. Part of the trestle had been washed away by the waters in July but worse than that, the waters surprisingly eroded the riverbed instead of depositing

⁵⁴ J. Franklin Ray, "Report No. 7 (June, 1946)," Letter to Col. F. W. Harris, United Nations Archives, July 15, 1946, 1.

⁵⁵ J. Franklin Ray, "Report No. 8 (July, 1946)," Letter to Col. F. W. Harris, United Nations Archives, August 20, 1946, 1.

⁵⁶ Edgerton-Tarpley, "A River Runs Through It," 153; Ray, "Report No. 8," 1.

⁵⁷ Ray, "Report No. 8," 3, 31, 50, 51.

enough silt to raise the bed, like it traditionally had done in the past.⁵⁸ This meant that a new dike would have to be constructed further up the river to contain the waters while they repaired the main breach. Fighting over the train station near Huayuankou only exacerbated the existing supply issues and Chiang's "Order 86" in July for the military to assist UNRRA/CNRRA deliveries had no effect.⁵⁹ Franc Shor, an Executive Officer for the UNRRA, admitted that the "minor hurdles appear endless" in his December report but also speculated that the Yellow River Project could be completed in January and that the northern dikes could possibly handle "low and medium stages" of the river but were not yet ready for the high flood stages of the summer.⁶⁰ The CCP disagreed and pointed out that none of the fifteen billion yuan had been provided to the northern bed residents, which at this point was worth less than half of what it was when the promise was made in July.⁶¹

This brings up a chronic issue that the GMD faced during this time as the economy continuously sank deeper and deeper into a hole. By December 1946, the cost of living in Shanghai had increased over six hundred percent from January.⁶² Maintaining a massive army which boasted over three million soldiers while attempting to repair the damage that eight years of war with Japan had caused was proving to be a bigger and costlier task than the government was prepared for.⁶³ Part of the problem was rampant corruption throughout the government and while this issue is not specific to the Yellow River Project, it is worth pointing out how it damaged the UNRRA's relationship with the government. In March 1946, the UNRRA reported

⁵⁸ Franc Shor, "Report No. 12 (November, 1946)," Letter to Col. Fred D. Harris, United Nations Archives, December 30, 1946, 37-38.

⁵⁹ Ray, "Report No. 8," Enclosure 2 pg1; Franc Shor, "Report No. 10 (September, 1946)," Letter to J. Franklin Ray, United Nations Archives, October 25, 1946, 2.

⁶⁰ Shor, "Report No. 13," 3, 35.

⁶¹ Shor, "Report No. 13," Appendix 14.

⁶² Shor, "Report No. 13," Appendix 13.

⁶³ Shor, "Report No. 14," Section XI, 3-4.

that in Henan “levies on food stock by the military and government authorities in various sections to keep the armies in the field further drains the slender supply.”⁶⁴ In April, these tactics evolved into GMD soldiers confiscating UNRRA flour from workers with little to no compensation.⁶⁵ The UNRRA officially complained in May that the CNRRA Waterway Transport division still had no funds and the only staff were UNRRA workers on loan and in June, its partner, the CNRRA Highway Transport division, was under investigation for corruption.⁶⁶ This, in combination with the CNRRA selling the UNRRA needed supplies, paints a fairly clear picture of the GMD taking advantage of the UNRRA and the UNRRA knowing it.

Tension was palpable on the Yellow River Project as Todd, usually apolitical in his work and writing about China, openly criticized the GMD for failing to pay the residents in the northern bed on January 7, 1947.⁶⁷ Another issue emerged with the repair that caused a shift in tactics to build an earthen mound to reinforce the dike and would delay the closure until March.⁶⁸ Between the pressure from Todd, the CCP, and the delay, the GMD agreed to meet in February to sort through the issues. On February 7, the GMD released the funds and agreed to only complete the closure when all parties, the Chinese Liberated Area Relief Association (CLARA), UNRRA, and CNRRA, agreed and the northern dike system had been repaired.⁶⁹ The GMD, however, had no intention of following through with this and continued to focus on the main breach. This could have been because Chiang Kai-shek was desperate to restore legitimacy to his government through the Yellow River, but he also had military reasons for wanting the breach

⁶⁴ Kizer, “Report No. 4,” 8.

⁶⁵ Ray, “Report No. 5,” 6.

⁶⁶ Ray, “Report No. 6,” 2; Ray, “Report No. 7,” 3.

⁶⁷ Henry R. Lieberman, “China Dike Closing Subject To Delay: UNRRA Engineer To Confer On Problems As Communists Again Oppose Project,” *New York Times*, Jan 08, 1947. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/china-dike-closing-subject-delay/docview/107888850/se-2?accountid=14784>.

⁶⁸ Shor, “Report No. 14,” 32.

⁶⁹ Franc Shor, “Report No. 15 (February, 1947),” Letter to Col. Fred D. Harris, United Nations Archives, March 28, 1947, 45-46.

closed. Chiang believed that by reverting the river to its old course that he would isolate a prominent CCP force and be able to reclaim Northern China from the CCP.⁷⁰ In March, the UNRRA reacted to the deception by pulling their personnel from the project because the northern dikes were still in disrepair and the people had not yet been relocated from the old bed.⁷¹ By this point, it was too late, and the breach was closed on March 15, 1947. The original mission was a success but the only group that was happy with the results was the GMD.

Despite all of these issues, it is an incredible achievement to have repaired such a massive gap in a little over a year's time. One massive benefit was that people could return to farming, providing themselves and the country with an extremely important food supply. However, the GMD's hasty effort to close the gap once again excluded warning those in the Yellow River's path. The water swept away many villages but since it was not the high-water season, it killed hundreds of people as opposed to the hundreds of thousands, and created a fraction of the number of refugees from the previous crisis.⁷² The operation certainly can be viewed as a technical success but classifying it as such ignores the workers who were not paid because of their ideology and the people who were left homeless by the Yellow River's return. These people were not just pawns in the grand strategy of the civil war like the GMD thought. The CCP knew how to mobilize their resentment, and the resentment of the people who were originally flooded, into action that would define the civil war.

Legacy

By breaching the dikes of the Yellow River, the Guomindang betrayed their citizens and the very notion of governmental legitimacy that had been upheld in China for centuries. Many

⁷⁰ Edgerton-Tarpley, "A River Runs Through It," 155.

⁷¹ Edgerton-Tarpley, "A River Runs through It," 158.

⁷² Muscolino, *The Ecology of War in China*, 203.

citizens likely did not know or did not care who was responsible for making the initial breach, but they did know who was supposed to help them through and end the catastrophe. Even the attempts that the GMD made to provide relief were self-serving and militaristic in nature. When it came time to remedy the situation, the government ignored its northern citizen's desires for a potential military advantage. These actions all added up to significant distrust and disinterest in the GMD's political machinations.

When the repair effort started, GMD officials hoped that restoring the river would reaffirm their legitimacy as they faced the prospect of civil war against the CCP. This hope, however, was ill-founded as the suffering that the citizens had endured was not so easily forgotten and returning things to normal was viewed as more of a responsibility that the government owed them than something that would generate any goodwill.⁷³ To make the GMD's job of winning over the people of China harder was the fact that the CCP had considerably more experience actually doing it. The CCP had survived for years through guerilla tactics and peasant support.⁷⁴ They knew the people better because they were forced to by the GMD's army hunting them while they fled through China's vast countryside to Yen-an in 1934. From there they waged guerilla warfare against Japan for eight years, earning the respect of the rural populace, only to continue these tactics against the GMD.⁷⁵

In addition, there was a strong anti-colonial sentiment among China's populace and the "go it alone" message that the CCP broadcast was especially appealing. This stemmed from the Century of Humiliation (Bainian guochi) where western powers took advantage of China's

⁷³ Edgerton-Tarpley, "A River Runs Through It," 162.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth J. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1980, 211.

⁷⁵ Franc Shor, "Report No. 11 (October, 1946)," Letter to J. Franklin Ray, United Nations Archives, December 3, 1946, 5.

isolationist past through a series of unequal treaties, wars, and colonization.⁷⁶ In contrast, the GMD was tied heavily to foreign support, particularly the United States which had maintained a military presence in China until January 1947.⁷⁷ The CCP made a point to consistently attack this connection throughout the civil war. A breaking point was reached in December when a US Marine raped a woman in Beijing, sparking national outrage. After water was released into the northern riverbed to make repairs on the main breach easier, a pro-communist newspaper compared the event to the December rape.⁷⁸ That spelled the end of direct US involvement in China for several decades.

Even after the US navy left, it was a common belief that the UNRRA was little more than a puppet of the US government, an association that severely damaged the organization's reputation in the Shantung province. In October 1946, the UNRRA informed Zhou Enlai of this and asked for assistance but only received assurances that CCP officials knew the difference.⁷⁹ For what it is worth, there was significant evidence to link the UNRRA and the US together, especially in northern China. The organization was largely funded by the US, the first delivery of UNRRA supplies to the region was performed by the US Navy in January, and, because of the military situation, many of the supplies after that were delivered via US airlifts.⁸⁰ In agreeing to work solely through the CNRRA and neglecting CLARA, the UNRRA made a political decision as well. The UNRRA's mission was to provide apolitical aid but it certainly felt political to the dike workers who were never paid because of where they lived. Tensions rose to the point that a UNRRA worker was murdered near Beijing by a communist and sixty-three dike workers were

⁷⁶ William A. Callahan, "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (2004): 202. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40645112>

⁷⁷ Shor, "Report No. 14," 2.

⁷⁸ Edgerton-Tarpley, "A River Runs Through It," 155, 157.

⁷⁹ Franc Shor, "Report No. 10 (September, 1946)," Letter to J. Franklin Ray, United Nations Archives, October 25, 1946, 4.

⁸⁰ Kizer, "Report No. 2," 3; Shor, "Report No. 14," 2.

killed in February 1947, which led to the cancellation of the UNRRA inspecting the northern dikes.⁸¹ Animosity towards the international community continued after the CCP came to power in 1949 as well, and while this cannot be completely contributed to the Yellow River, it certainly did not help.

Perhaps the most dramatic showcase of the breach's legacy, however, was its role in overthrowing the Guomindang. With the UNRRA unwilling to send personnel or supplies to the north in February, the CCP again displayed their talent for mobilizing the masses. Concerned about the high-water season, four hundred thousand workers took up repairs on the "The People's Dike," not for money but simply to save their homes.⁸² Self-preservation was a strong rallying cry used by the communists in later years and was effective because it was originally formed out of necessity. While "The People's Dike" did not completely contain the Yellow River, there were very few casualties from the flooding, and it was regarded as a moral victory for the people of China.⁸³ Without expensive equipment or training, the people of China working together could seemingly accomplish anything.

Chiang Kai-shek viewed the rerouting of the Yellow River as a way to isolate two major communist armies so that they could be more easily eliminated and bring an end to the civil war. He was correct that the closure would have an outsized impact on the war, but he was wrong on how. The river was meant to be a natural barrier that could protect the southern flank of the "Strong Point Offensive," a concentration of the GMD's elite forces in Shantung that would use a massive pincer maneuver to conquer the North. The first pincer was meant to capture Yan'an, which, while successful, the CCP had largely abandoned in early 1947 in anticipation of this

⁸¹ Shor, "Report No. 15," 4, 45-46.

⁸² Edgerton-Tarpley, "A River Runs Through It," 162-163.

⁸³ Edgerton-Tarpley, "A River Runs Through It," 169.

move.⁸⁴ The river's role in the war, however, was not over. Mirroring the mobilization effort for the construction of "The People's Dike," the Jin-Ji-Yu-Lu field army worked with locals to construct ferries and cross the Yellow River.⁸⁵ The southern flank was exposed, and on May 16, 1947, the GMD was dealt a stunning defeat at the Battle of Menglianggu.⁸⁶ The GMD's armies were then cut off, isolated, and overextended. The CCP capitalized on this momentum, marching continuously south and by 1949, Chiang and the GMD had fled to Taiwan.

Conclusion

Controlling the Yellow River has always been tied to the right to rule in China. Chiang Kai-shek thought that breaching the dike was a new way of controlling the river for military purposes, but this unique version of scorched earth tactics was far more harmful to their own people than to their enemies. In *The Generalissimo*, a study of Chiang Kai-shek's personal diaries, Jay Taylor writes, "Chiang no doubt saw the sacrifice as warranted in the context of a war for the survival of Chinese Civilization, a war in which there would be many rivers of blood, but he also showed no private remorse, not mentioning the event in his diary."⁸⁷ The goal for a long defensive war was achieved but at the cost of millions of innocent lives; it is beyond deplorable. As the refugees arrived from the flooded region, the GMD sought new ways to take advantage of these people through forced labor and military service. The war with Japan exposed many of the fundamental flaws with Guomindang leadership, but the breach of the Yellow River dikes broadcasted the worst flaw for a government to have: the complete disregard for its people.

⁸⁴ S. C. M. Paine, *The Wars for Asia, 1911-1949*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 252, <https://hdl-handle-net.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/2027/heb.32834>. EPUB.

⁸⁵ Edgerton-Tarpley, "A River Runs Through It," 164-165.

⁸⁶ Paine, *The Wars for Asia*, 253.

⁸⁷ Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-Shek and the Struggle for Modern China*, Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.

The Yellow River had the worst effect in Henan as the people were given no warning of the incoming floods. The flat landscape offered nowhere to escape for those in the immediate path, but those who were lucky enough to survive the initial onslaught were only subjected to more horrors. The intricate agricultural system in the plains of China required constant maintenance, but as the survivors fled the area, they destroyed these landscapes and eliminated the crucial labor needed to rebuild them. The destruction of so much land left the government desperate for food to feed its massive army, so it established a grain tax on the drought-stricken people. Locusts nesting in the old riverbed migrated south to make a bad situation even worse, culminating in a terrible famine that created millions more refugees and casualties. The breach created cascading impacts on this region that the people would not soon forget.

After Japan's surrender, Chiang Kai-shek secured international support through the UNRRA who hoped to remain apolitical despite obvious signs of a civil war brewing. Ultimately, the political climate made the UNRRA and USA's ties to the GMD inherently political. The UNRRA agreed to operate solely through the GMD's new organization, the CNRRA, which consistently mismanaged supplies and at times outright refused deliveries to the north. Repairs were needed on the northern dikes in Shantung, but the GMD opted to ignore the people again and closed the breach in March 1947, flooding the inhabitants who had moved into the old riverbed again. Chiang believed that this would restore governmental legitimacy and lead to a military operation that would finally end the civil war. Instead, the people turned against him, helping communist forces ford the river and destroy the GMD's elite forces in Shantung.

The citizens of northern China did not assist the CCP simply because of the initial floods, or the famine, or the second floods; they did it for all of these reasons. When the breach was plugged, it appeared that the GMD would prevail over the CCP in the struggle for China, but this

was unacceptable to the citizens who had survived the devastating crisis. Frustration with their government flowed much like the Yellow River: starting as a shallow stream, growing into a river of grievances, and finally cresting over the banks and becoming an unstoppable flood. This is why it is necessary to examine the flood in its totality. The people of China suffered far more than what is indicated by the initial casualties that Lary discusses, no matter how groundbreaking her work seemed.⁸⁸ The impacts of the Henan Famine of 1942-1943 that writers like Muscolino and Ritter explore were far more extensive than just the direct suffering incurred.⁸⁹ Edgerton-Tarpley perhaps comes closest to capturing the magnitude of this event by focusing on how it inspired the people to support the CCP in Shantung, but she still leaves out how the famine only added to their frustration and desperation.⁹⁰ Chiang's forces could not recover from the loss in Shantung and by 1949, they were forced to flee to Taiwan and formed the Republic of China, while the CCP formed the People's Republic of China on the mainland. This breach has never been healed and in that way, the Yellow River's legacy lives on.

⁸⁸ Lary, "Drowned Earth;" Lary, "The Waters Covered the Earth;" Lary, *China's Republic*.

⁸⁹ Muscolino, *The Ecology of War in China*; Muscolino, "Violence Against People and the Land;" Ritter, *Forgotten Ally*; Rana Mitter, "Imperialism, Transnationalism, and the Reconstruction of Post-war China: UNRRA in China, 1944-7," *Past & Present* 218, no. 218 (2013).

⁹⁰ Edgerton-Tarpley, "Between War and Water;" Edgerton-Tarpley, "A River Runs Through It."

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