



8-2023

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Recommended Citation

Bedeski, Robert (2023) "Book Review: Philip Ball. *The Water Kingdom: A Secret History of China*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 89: No. 89, Article 18.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol89/iss89/18>

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**Philip Ball. *The Water Kingdom: A Secret History of China*
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017**

Reviewed by Robert Bedeski

Over centuries scores of sinologists have sought to define the essence of China. Philip Ball addresses and goes well beyond the materialist paradigm of Karl Wittfogel's hydraulic thesis, which described the role of water management in China as stimulating state development. In his theory, government emerged as the central institution to manage transportation, flood control and irrigation. Ball also sees water management as critical in Chinese civilization and injects his description with spiritual and moral content, drawing on poetry, art, biography and extensive reference to historical events. His book is an exploration of the role of water in China's culture, history, state administration, and economy.

The book can be interpreted as an implicit critique or an expansion of Wittfogel's hydraulic theory, though more sideways than direct, as the author lays out the multiple manifestations of water and describes "an intimate connection between hydraulic engineering, governance, moral rectitude and metaphysical speculation that has no parallel anywhere in the world." (70) The author's originality and sensitivity to a wide range of sources present a new and penetrating understanding of China as civilization and state.

The long tradition of Chinese brush painting provides a sense of his approach. Landscapes are *shanshui*, or "mountains and water," and suffused with a feeling for nature and the smallness of man in its presence. Yet the artist, usually a scholar-official and rarely a professional artisan, tries to capture the essence of the land and water interaction, with minimal concern for realistic detail. A landscape painting is both an acceptance of human littleness in the cosmos and simultaneously a mortal domination of the scene by inscribing its elements with brush and ink. Earth and water are sources of life. Chinese landscape painting acknowledges the fact with feeling, skill and a sense of proportion placing man and his works as accidental details. The term "shanshui" (山水) conveys the essence of human existence in monochromatic scenes repeated countless times. These paintless paintings express a feeling of awe in the presence of nature, and at the same time convey the sense of domination or at least struggle of man to comprehend some meaning of life in the cosmos.

Water has given life to China and has also taken it away by the millions. From earliest times through the present, hydraulic engineering and devices have sought to control the flow, benefits and devastation of the Yangzi and Yellow rivers and their tributaries. Controlled water has irrigated farms. Fertile loess sediment from the Yellow River enriched the North China Plain, like the Nile's annual donation of fertile soil to Egyptian farmers.

Sampans and multi-storied boats plied the rivers and lakes for trade and for war. Periodic floods, some manmade, killed hundreds of thousands by drowning, famine or exposure. Water was a weapon of war and a double-edged sword inflicting slaughter on generals who failed to calculate flow and climate.

The author describes how water consciousness has permeated the metaphors of painting, poetry and religion. “According to Confucius: Water, which extends everywhere and gives everything life without acting, is like virtue. Its stream, which descends downward, twisting and turning but always following the same principle, is like rightness. Its bubbling up, never running dry, is like the *dao*.”(79) Ruling the state is like water management which requires “..discerning and respecting the *dao* of the rivers, so a wise ruler will identify and observe the natural tendencies of his people. Then all will be peaceful and orderly.” (65)

The role of water has been central in agriculture as a vital ingredient of farming and food production. Flooding of small and great rivers, especially the Yellow River, has made water management a top priority through history. Mythical and actual heroes were those who devised ways of reducing damage by raging torrents. Dikes, dams and canals have been the standard response to wayward rivers. Devices were invented to stir loess sediment so that it did not accumulate and raise the Yellow River level.

Rivers were harnessed and canals constructed to expedite trade and transport, bringing regions into mutual dependence and breaking down autonomy. When the Communists came to power, a major component of their economic agenda was water management, with a program of building dams. Modern China runs on electricity and hydropower became an additional reason to connect fluid flow to the power grid. Industrialization also brought population growth which has led to major pollution.

Water control has challenged the Chinese since ancient times, with land reclamation, canal construction and dike maintenance altering the landscape. Deforestation has quickened runoff into rivers with devastating effects. Ball tells the story of Chinese water with detailed scholarship. His telling also explains how the Chinese state evolved an institutional response to its challenges. The Chinese state can be seen as the painting metaphor writ large – recognition of nature’s power and at the same time attempting to channel water into productive and less destructive impact by understanding its essence. Under Maoist Communism the party dictatorship proclaimed that human will, inspired by ideology, could command nature and overcome hydraulic tragedy by building dams and canals, while reclaiming waste land for agriculture along the way. Some projects helped while others had an opposite effect.

The Three Gorges Dam has the earmarks of benefits and potential disaster. It is the most recent attempt to manage the Yangzi and make its western reaches more navigable.

It is also an enterprise to harness hydropower and lessen dependence on coal burning for electricity. According to Ball, "Around 1,000 megawatts are being added to China's coal-plant generating capacity every week, and the environmental consequences of mining and burning this dirty fossil fuel are onerous both for the local populations and for the world." (252). The dam was primarily constructed to manage the river so that its upper course could be navigable to larger ships.

It was also touted as a monument to China's international prestige and power. (As one who has cruised through the Gorges several times, I was struck by the beauty of the region, its history and the sheer will power of taming the river with dams and locks.)

The "Water Kingdom" has become the "Water Republic," and still confronts China's rulers with floods and droughts, though with less destruction thanks to past and current projects. Water control in the form of flood and irrigation management was not only vital in maintaining agricultural production and life protection, but affected dynastic legitimacy and government credibility. Emperors, statesmen and engineers saw danger and opportunity in the great waterways which affected China's self-image, affecting internal trade and human efforts at control. These were sources of unity as well as bringers of sorrow. Building bridges to bring north and south closer together had been a modernizing dream interrupted by civil war and invasion. In the first decade of the People's Republic of China a double deck bridge was built at Wuhan to span the Yangzi and many others followed.

Waterways have been a major factor in China's wars. Rivers served as routes for transport of men and weapons, and occasional battlefields. They have also served as frontiers between warring states. The Nationalists cut the dikes on the lower Yellow River in a vain attempt to slow the advance of Japanese forces. The net result was a major famine due to major loss of farmland.

Analyzing the role of water in its many manifestations, Ball identifies its key role in building and maintaining the state. Dynasties rose and fell on the basis of how well they managed water directly or indirectly as fortunes of the empire depended on the Will of Heaven. At lower levels local officials were in charge of waterworks and were blamed when things went wrong. Communists translated the Heaven metaphor into human-willed historical process. They espoused a martial approach to defeating nature as the intemperate rivers became symbols of oppression that had to be tamed. The Yellow River disasters were a type of reactionary crime to be eliminated under Maoist orthodoxy.

The book is an erudite and scholarly summary of the role that water has played in many aspects of Chinese history. Water became a metaphor for life and nature, finding expression in art, religion and philosophy. Ball presents its numerous manifestations and challenges with effectiveness.

The reader is likely to complete the book with a sense of wonder and a new perspective on the commonplace liquid vital to life and yet a destructive solvent when carried in great rivers straining their banks.