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The Nature of Disaster in China: The 1931 Yangzi River Flood
by Chris Courtney (review)

Lillian M. Li

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The Nature of Disaster in China: The 1931 Yangzi River Flood. By Chris Courtney (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018) 310 pp. \$99.99

The 1931 Yangzi River Flood was one of the most extensive and damaging of the many floods in China during the twentieth century. It extended into eight provinces in central China and beyond to the north, west, and south. As many as 50 million people may have been affected, losing homes and crops. An unknown number of people died, as many as 2 million (3–5). Occurring when the Nationalist government was establishing itself at Nanjing but also when Communist insurgent forces were threatening, the flood received a great deal of international attention and assistance. Yet, as Courtney notes, it has never been the subject of an academic monograph.

Courtney employs a multidimensional perspective that benefits from new trends in environmental history, as well as the more conventional institutional and political approaches of historians. To this end, he presents six histories of the 1931 flood. In the first, “The Long River,” he develops the idea that floods were not disastrous until humans started to inhabit flood plains, practice agriculture, and attempt to control the rivers by dams, dikes, or dredging. “As people intervened in river flow, floods were no longer determined solely by climate and hydrology but also by economics and politics. Human agency became a key variable in the disaster regime” (28). As the population grew, vulnerability to flooding increased; by the late nineteenth century, a “modern disaster regime, which left people chronically vulnerable to hazards,” had been formed (37).

In the second chapter, “The Flood Pulse,” Courtney offers “a more holistic history of the 1931 flood.” Ecological disturbances resulted in the spread of diseases such as malaria, typhoid fever, and dysentery, which were a greater cause of death than the loss of food crops and hunger. Although loosely connected, many sub-topics in this chapter offer unusual insights. For example, the frequently observed practice of eating earth (white clay called Goddess of Mercy Earth) had some medicinal value (80–81).

The fascinating, richly detailed, third chapter, “The Dragon King,” explores the origins and significance of dragons in Chinese mythology and the role of the Dragon King in local religion and “ethnometeorology.” It starts with the demolition of the Dragon King Temple in Wuhan in 1930, which was part of the Republican government’s campaign against popular religion and myths. Local people believed that it had provoked the anger of the Dragon King, who retaliated by unleashing the floods of 1931.

The fourth chapter, “A Sense of Disaster,” relates the felt experience of flood victims in Wuhan, the city at the center of the flood zone. Because it was one of China’s most important treaty ports, Wuhan had many foreign, as well as Chinese, residents who recorded their direct

sensory experiences—sights, sounds, and smells. The least analytical of the chapters, this one makes the greatest and most memorable impression.

The Nationalist government considered its 1931 flood-relief campaign a great success, helping to legitimize its own authority, albeit while using Western assistance and aid. Chapter 5, “Disaster Experts,” is critical of the government’s management of relief and reconstruction, including food relief, labor relief, public health, and sanitation. It juxtaposes modern technical expertise against “vernacular expertise,” which Courtney considers to have been more effective in famine survival. This argument, however, has problems; for one, the food and labor-relief techniques and theories described were, in fact, traditionally Chinese. The chapter’s criticism of the U. S. government’s loan of 450,000 tons of wheat and flour as self-serving U. S. farm assistance that anticipated similar farm-subsidy programs after World War II is a long but unnecessary digression.

The sixth chapter, “Floating Population,” further criticizes the government’s relief programs and praises “vernacular expertise.” It asserts that government-resettlement camps only hastened the spread of disease and that traditional coping methods—such as internal migration, prostitution, child sales, begging, etc.—were criminalized by the state. It argues, but not convincingly, that “the experience of Wuhan in 1931 demonstrates the critical influence that political dynamics can have on a disaster regime. Violence, and the distrust that it inspires, acts as an amplifier for humanitarian catastrophes (229).”

Each of these six cleverly researched and well-written histories of the 1931 flood presents insights of great interest but at the expense of a single focus/purpose that might make a more lasting impression. By expanding Chapters 4 to 6, and analyzing the human, political, social, and economic dimensions of the flood, Courtney could have written a more conventional book. By foregrounding environmental and ecological perspectives, however, he has perhaps made another kind of historical contribution.

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Violence and Order on the Chengdu Plain: The Story of a Secret Brotherhood in Rural China, 1939–1949. By Di Wang (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2018) 280 pp. \$90.00 cloth \$29.95 paper

It is well known that a vibrant sub-culture of so-called “secret societies” existed in China during at least the last several centuries. Notwithstanding some excellent research on the subject, however, academic writing about these organizations is still in short supply due to the dearth of reliable sources. In this fascinating study, which is part history, part sociology, and part ethnography, Wang builds on his own earlier works about local society in the Chengdu area in southwestern China to offer a