

The Yellow River: The Problem of Water in Modern China

By David A. Pietz

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Flowing through the heart of the North China Plain?home to 200 million people?the Yellow River sustains one of China's core regions. Yet this vital water supply has become highly vulnerable in recent decades, with potentially serious repercussions for China's economic, social, and political stability. *The Yellow River* is an investigative expedition to the source of China's contemporary water crisis, mapping the confluence of forces that have shaped the predicament that the world's most populous nation now faces in managing its water reserves.

Chinese governments have long struggled to maintain ecological stability along the Yellow River, undertaking ambitious programs of canal and dike construction to mitigate the effects of recurrent droughts and floods. But particularly during the Maoist years the North China Plain was radically re-engineered to utilize every drop of water for irrigation and hydroelectric generation. As David A. Pietz shows, Maoist water management from 1949 to 1976 cast a long shadow over the reform period, beginning in 1978. Rapid urban growth, industrial expansion, and agricultural intensification over the past three decades of China's economic boom have been realized on a water resource base that was acutely compromised, with effects that have been more difficult and costly to overcome with each passing decade. Chronicling this complex legacy, *The Yellow River* provides important insight into how water challenges will affect China's course as a twenty-first-century global power.

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Editorial Review

Review
Written in an accessible style, the book has something to offer to those unfamiliar with China as well as to China specialists...It is easily the most useful and insightful addition to the relatively new field of Chinese environmental history. (Lillian Li, *Environmental History*)

The book provides an invaluable addition to environmental and science studies, as well as to ecological history. Most importantly, it is a major contribution to the study of water, which remains not simply the source of all life on earth, but our most precious and endangered resource. In the face of global climate change, Pietz makes China's experiences understandable. (James L. Hevia, *New Global Studies*)

It is arguably one of the most important books I have ever reviewed. (Tony Allan, recipient: 2008 Stockholm Water Prize; *China Information*)

Environmental historians commonly acknowledge the difficulty of establishing the global significance of local study, but Pietz's book is exemplary in this regard. He makes it clear that the Yellow River posed a water problem of global proportions...This book significantly adds to the burgeoning field of global environmental history. It's scholarly yet also accessible style will appeal not only to specialists of the field but to a wider audience interested in China's environmental issues. (Yan Gao, *Agricultural History*)

Though the Maoist technology complex had profound impacts on China's waterscape that persist today, compounded by the effects of pollution and global warming, Pietz is careful to show that the challenges facing contemporary are not only based in Mao's "war on nature," but instead have historical roots that reach much further back in time. This is fascinating reading for anyone interested in modern China, the histories of ecology and environment, and contemporary policy. (Carla Nappi, New Books Network)

Environmental historians commonly acknowledge the difficulty of establishing the global significance of local study, but Pietz’s book is exemplary in this regard. He makes it clear that the yellow river posed a water problem of global proportions… This book significantly adds to the burgeoning field of global environmental history. Its scholarly yet also accessible style will appeal not only to specialists of the field but to a wider audience interested in China’s environmental issues. (Yan Gao *Agricultural History* 2016-01-01)

David Pietz provides an extremely well-written and accessible account of the challenges of managing water in China over the past three millennia…The book is very authoritative and based on long engagement with the continuities present in Chinese assumptions on water resources and how society’s needs should be prioritized…The book will be very valuable to those who already know a lot about China but not much about the strategic importance of its water resources. For those who know little about China this book is a very welcome publication…It is arguably one of the most important books I have ever reviewed. (Tony Allan *China Information* 2015-12-01)

[Pietz] has provided an excellent overview of the Yellow River with its impossible geophysical limitations and its many technological and political controversies. Written in an accessible style, the book has something to offer to those unfamiliar with China as well as to China specialists…It is easily the most useful and insightful addition to the relatively new field of Chinese environmental history. (Lillian Li *Environmental History* 2015-07-29)

This book's value lies in showing that the issues are not confined to geology and engineering. Water in China is an unavoidably political issue because of cultural beliefs. (Philip Ball *Nature* 2015-01-08)

[Pietz] is especially good at presenting and evaluating the history of water management projects in China, and the growth dilemmas that the current Chinese leadership faces…The book provides an invaluable addition to environmental and science studies, as well as to ecological history. Most importantly, it is a major contribution to the study of water, which remains not simply the source of all life on earth, but our most precious and endangered resource. In the face of global climate change, Pietz makes China's experiences understandable. (James L. Hevia *New Global Studies* 2015-09-01)

A timely and original history that sheds light on China's contemporary water crisis. In addition to skillfully weaving together a history of the Yellow River that spans more than 3,000 years, Pietz's meticulous and comprehensive study offers a wide perspective on China's environmental concerns. Should be read not only by historians of China, but by anyone interested in today's most pressing environmental concerns. (Micah S. Muscolino, author of *The Ecology of War in China: Henan Province, the Yellow River, and Beyond, 1938–1950*)

David Pietz's tale of continuity and discontinuity in the North China Plain and notoriously silt-cursed Yellow River is an important contribution to the environmental history of one of China's most fascinating and important ecosystems. He chronicles flood and drought, famine and war, sudden changes of river course and the river's failures to reach the sea. He also raises important doubts about the state's present-day efforts to maintain self-sufficiency in grain and its emphasis on technological mastery of nature through the South–North Water Transfer Project, reminding us that the historical roots of such efforts can be traced to premodern times. (Judith Shapiro, author of *China's Environmental Challenges*)

About the Author
David A. Pietz is UNESCO Chair of Environmental History and Professor of Modern Chinese History at the University of Arizona.

Users Review

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