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1989, a Watershed in Chinese History?

Seungho Lee, Water and Development in China. The Political Economy of Shanghai Water Policy

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- 1 How to explain the evolution of water management policies in Shanghai? This is the question tackled by Seungho Lee (University of Nottingham, UK) in this book. He describes a process of institutional change and shows how the combined action of several actors (NGOs, private enterprises, international organisations) has stimulated awareness and measures taken by local government.
- 2 Lee borrows the grid-group typology from British anthropologist Mary Douglas, which enables him to better define the various actors involved in water policy in Shanghai. First the “hierarchists,” designating groups whose workings are strictly regulated through a pronounced hierarchy, and represented here by the government of Shanghai. “Egalitarians” are freer, and their actions are motivated by moral and ethical objectives: these are the non-governmental organisations (NGOs). “Entrepreneurs” envisage relations with other individuals in terms of competition, and consider all ties as provisional and renegotiable at any time. The companies entrusted with water management in Shanghai represent this group. Lastly, the “fatalists” are composed of social group who are excluded and have no autonomy. These are the citizens of Shanghai. Lee adds a fifth group, the “international hierarchists,” which designates the international organisations involved in water policies in Shanghai.¹ Starting from what seeks to be a Foucauldian analysis, Lee shows how the interaction among these various groups has enabled an evolution in the discourse on the environment.² Lastly, he draws inspiration from the co-evolution approach and from complexity theory in order to describe the evolution of policy in this field.³
- 3 Each actor gets its own chapter: the government and its reforms (Chapter 4), the growth of civil movements (Chapter 5), the cautious arrival of foreign companies and the emergence of Chinese companies (Chapter 6), and the influence of international

organisations (Chapter 7). The book is introduced by a physical description of the water situation in Shanghai (Chapter 2, following the introduction) and a theoretical introduction (Chapter 3).

- 4 Up to the end of the 1990s, the government of Shanghai held the monopoly in the water industry. Water quality was constantly deteriorating as a result of the industrialisation and urbanisation of the region. While available resources were abundant (estimated at 5,240 m³ per person as against 2,670 m³ at the national level), Shanghai suffered from a new form of scarcity: the city lacked unpolluted water. In the 1980s, 60 percent of industrial sewage as well as many polluting products (especially pesticides and fertilisers) were dumped into the rivers. In the 1980s, the press began to report several scandals and environmental problems: eutrophication of Lake Dianshan in the summer of 1989, the dumping of phenol in the Huangpu only 10 kilometres from a drinking water pumping station in 1989, the dumping of sewage in the Huangpu by the Jianglong Chemical Company, and so on.
- 5 In this context, new actors began to intervene in the water sector at the end of the 1990s. On the one hand emerged environmental NGOs and GONGOs (government organised NGOs) at the local and national level, in particular the China Green Student Forum, Shanghai Green Union, and Grassroots Community, as well as the “local communities” (shequ). While their autonomy remained limited, the government did not remain deaf to their demands and organised a range of relevant events (World Water Day, World Environment Day). At the same time, the government sought to attract foreign investment, technology, and know-how in water treatment. Many companies seized the opportunity to enter the Chinese market, with varying degrees of success, including the success of Veolia (in a joint venture with the Shanghai Pudong Water Supply Corporation in 2002) and Suez, and the less fortunate Thames Water. Lastly, international agencies became involved in the Shanghai water sector in the 1980s (the World Bank, the Asia Development Bank, and the national development agencies of Western countries) and launched projects in cooperation with the municipal government (the Shanghai Sewerage Project, the Shanghai Environment Project).
- 6 In 2000, the government created the Shanghai Water Authority to manage water resources, passed a law on the assessment of the environmental impact of industrial projects before their launch (2002), and imposed the “three synchronisations” (of design, construction, and functioning of industrial projects with waste management) as well as taxes on pollution. The water situation improved: for example, one programme enabled a clean-up of the Suzhou River and a reduction of the disagreeable odours that arose from it. Treatment of domestic and industrial sewage also increased (in 2003, 53 percent of the former and 95 percent of the latter were treated).
- 7 Thus in a few years the government of Shanghai was transformed from a simple water supplier to a regulation entity managing institutional evolution in the area. The dual relationship between state and society evolved in a few years towards a multifaceted institutional system in which a range of actors interact, adapting their dynamics to new environments.
- 8 Unfortunately the challenges remain numerous. Laws often go unenforced, the various government agencies in the sector are often in competition, the government has given priority to cleaning up the biggest rivers (Suzhou and Huangpu) to the detriment of secondary rivers, and so on.

- 9 Lee's book is very thoroughly documented, and he has succeeded in clearly and concisely presenting the various actors and their evolution. However, one regrets the overall "drawer" structure used by author, which presents one actor in each part without any problematisation. This presentation is justified by the use of Mary Douglas's theories, but it does not highlight individual specific roles or their interaction in the evolution of policies. And why deal with administrative evolutions before the factors that set them off? Lastly, it is regrettable that Lee draws no conclusions about the evolution of water policies at the national level. Shanghai is a very particular example. It would be interesting to know to what extent the institutional changes that have taken place there are applicable to the country as a whole (in particular to northern China, which is subject to major drought problems). Apart from these shortcomings, *Water and Development in China* provides an excellent analysis of institutional change.
- 10 Translated by Michael Black
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NOTES

1. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, London, Barrie and Rockliff, 1970.
 2. He draws on the work of Maarten A. Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.
 3. Philip Anderson, "Complexity Theory and Organization Science," *Organization Science*, Vol. 10, n°3, May-June 1999 pp. 216 - 232; Arie Y. Lewin and Henk W. Volberda, "Prolegomena on Co-evolution: A Framework for Research on Strategy and New Organizational Forms," *Organization Science*, Vol. 10, n°5, September-October 1999, pp. 519-534.
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