

Restrain the enemy: Environmental alteration along the Yellow River (Inner Mongolia) in the early People's Republic

This part of the study deals with ecological changes in the environment of Gansu and Inner Mongolia since 1950. The construction of hydro-electrical large-scale projects at the upper reaches of the Yellow River in the early phase of the People's Republic (1949-1960), when first attempts were made to precipitous developments of economy and politics is one example of the human aim to conquer nature. Sustainable use of natural resources was quickly transformed into exploitation of soil. The whole period (1950-1970) was going along with deep changes in the Chinese society, which also reflected the environmental perception of the Chinese themselves. Ideological campaigns, like „The Great Leap Forward“ and „The Cultural Revolution“ defined nature as an opponent, which could be overcome with military hardness. Thousands of workers were mobilized in the course of “The Great Leap Forward“ and had to participate in the campaign of “The Large Fight Against The Yellow River“ (*da zhan Huanghe*). The lack of technical equipment forced the workers to settle many excavations, fills and drillings with bare body strength. The people were trained in comprehensive political education. Most of the projects seemed to be converted under high ideological pressure. The environmental perception of the population was certainly not uninfluenced by this.

Besides rural development and irrigation improvement in some parts of the area mentioned above, there were also opposite effects of canalizing and damming the rivers: Some counties did not profit from the rural development strategies. On the contrary, they suffered extremely from water shortage due to river being cut off in order to build giant water-reservoirs.

The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR) is one of the geographically most remote, underdeveloped, economically poor and technically underestimated countries of the world. The Inner Mongolian grasslands are the third largest in the world and are one of the two major wool growing provinces of China, containing the world's largest population of sheep, goat and cattle. When the IMAR was established in 1947, most of its six million people were living from pastoralism, and only a few depended on agricultural pursuit. Although the grasslands are vast, the last decades show a decline in grassland quantity and quality due to climate change and mismanagement of the natural grasslands, which seems to be caused by human activity. The growing economic development of this region accompanies the degradation of the natural ecology.

The proportional distribution of pasture land in IMAR is disparate. The Inner Mongolian land use varies across grassland types and along the transitional zone between the fertile agricultural south and the dry north of the grazing lands. During the last years this zone drifted further north due to growing migration of farmers cultivating, irrigating and transforming grassland to farmland. The 1960's and 1970's were times when this trend increased rapidly, before policy measurements tried to stabilize the situation in the 1980's.

Environmental degradation in China is not only a result of the industrialization beginning in the early 1950s, but also due to the immense population pressure from the 18th century onwards. The intense deforestation along the Yellow River upstream caused erosion, flooding and desertification along whole tracts of land. China lost more land, than it earned over the last two centuries. The economy-ecology-balance has been destroyed long before the industrialization process of 1953. Often rural development was accompanied by ecological disasters. Not only did the building of water reservoirs force more than 30.000 humans to leave their homes and to resettle somewhere else. It had a massive impact to the environment and their natural habitats. If vegetation deteriorates, endemic species and fertile soil will vanish and subsistence of local people will be endangered too. After years of struggling to assure livelihood people are forced to abandon their home.

It seems to be a universal attitude that most people feel a very strong identity connected to their hometown and homeland – not only in China. Governmental practices forcing natives to leave their habitat collide with local traditional feelings of a strong and close bonding for their origin.

The Following questions should be examined in this study:

1. Did the government generate any kind of environmental understanding. If so, What was the nature of this understanding?
2. How was the interaction between people and nature defined?
3. What have been significant alterations in Inner Mongolia environment since 1950?
3. How did the people cope with the new environmental situation – droughts, desertification and sandstorms as a result of river regulation and irrigation policies?
4. Did the numerous political campaigns during „The Great Leap Forward“ and „The Cultural Revolution“ have any affect on the environmental perception or did they lead to short term and superficial radicalizations?