

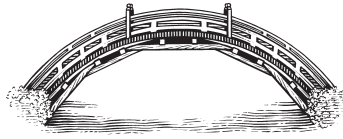
BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Andrew C. Mertha

*China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change*

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## Water Politics and Political Change in China

*David M. Lampton*

Andrew C. Mertha has written an important book, significant because its implications extend well beyond what may appear to be the narrow confines of water politics in China. *China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change* has a clear hypothesis germane to critical questions such as: What makes political opposition effective in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and how is the Chinese policy process, indeed the Chinese polity, changing? Moreover, his well-written and parsimonious book provides a roadmap to the increasingly complex Chinese bureaucracy and politically relevant groups as well as to the issues that animate these actors. Finally, the volume lightly touches on the possible implications of China's pluralization for the outside world, including the United States.

To help us get our intellectual arms around this book, I sequentially examine the following: the genealogy of Mertha's work, the book's central hypothesis, and the main findings. I conclude by identifying some of the implications of those findings for international relations and China's domestic political evolution.

### *Mertha's Intellectual Forbearers*

Mertha does what many area specialists often do not, and that is he situates his research in a body of comparative theory that enlarges the meaning of his findings beyond the narrow cases under examination. Mertha both uses preexistent theory to give meaning to his findings and contributes to that theory, thereby enlarging the audiences for, and the utility of, his work. *China's Water Warriors* expressly casts its argument in terms of the 1980s and 1990s literature that conceived of the Chinese polity in terms of a "fragmented authoritarian" (FA) system, a literature that Michel Oksenberg, Kenneth Lieberthal, and David M. Lampton animated. The central premises of the FA approach are that China is characterized by an institutional structure in which power was (and remains) fragmented among numerous and powerful bureaucratic and territorial actors and that policy outcomes often represent the mutual accommodation of these players—bargaining among these

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empowered (franchised) actors was (and remains) a central feature of the system.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, this fragmentation and the resultant bargaining that occurs permeate not only policy formulation but the implementation process as well. Mertha also acknowledges, and adds to or recalibrates, other earlier research, including: Karl Wittfogel's classic *Oriental Despotism*, John Kingdon's work on policy entrepreneurs, Baumgartner and Jones's issue-framing approach, and Elizabeth Economy's and Jennifer Turner's work on non-governmental actors in the environmental area in China. Beyond those explicitly acknowledged intellectual forbearers, his work also rests upon the endeavors of Skilling and Griffiths, who in the 1970s dealt with interest groups and interest tendencies in the Soviet Union. And almost everyone who has worked on water politics after he wrote his classic in 1949 entitled *TVA and the Grass Roots*, owes Philip Selznick a huge debt of intellectual gratitude for his thinking on organizational co-optation. Mertha has looked broadly for comparative work that helps illuminate and give meaning to his observations about China.

### *A Clear Hypothesis and Interesting Case Studies*

By looking at three hydro and water conservancy projects in China (in addition to offering a peek at the Three Gorges Dam project), Mertha seeks to answer the question of why the projects went ahead in two cases, why one was stopped, and why one was at least postponed.<sup>2</sup> He asks, in short: "Under what circumstances is political opposition effective in stopping high-priority state projects and what does this tell you about the evolutionary direction of the Chinese political system?" The principal determinants of whether or not a project was able to proceed were the degree to which the respective sides of the struggle had effective, compelling issue "frames" and which of the respective sides to the political struggle had effective "policy entrepreneurs." By "frame," Mertha means "organizing information in a manner that conforms to the structure of a good story" (p. 12). Alternatively put, a frame is a compelling case that mobilizes support. A "policy entrepreneur" is a politically active person or organization who builds "coalitions and broad-based support" (p. 16). He

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<sup>1</sup> The central, initial pieces of research that evolved into, and defined, the "fragmented authoritarian" approach were David M. Lampton, "Chinese Politics: The Bargaining Treadmill," *Issues & Studies* 23, no. 3 (March 1987): 11–41; David M. Lampton, ed., *Policy Implementation in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); and Kenneth Lieberthal and David M. Lampton, eds., *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> The three projects that constitute his case studies are Pubugou (chap. 3), Dujiangyan (chap. 4), and Nu River (chap. 5).

goes on to define the properties of effective policy frames and effective policy entrepreneurs.

The overriding conclusions of *China's Water Warriors* are twofold. The first is that China is evolving in a direction in which the capacity to frame issues is diffusing to more and more individuals, “civic” organizations, the mass media, and diverse government units. The second is that more and more social and bureaucratic space is opening up for policy entrepreneurs. In the case in which the opposition to a dam project had both a compelling issue frame and effective policy entrepreneurs, the project was halted (Dujiangyan). In the case in which the balance of forces (capacity to frame issues and policy entrepreneurs) was more evenly divided between the opposition and the project promoters (Nu River), the project decision was left in a more unresolved state, with a call for more environmental impact statements and deferral. In the case where the balance of advantage rested with project promoters, the project went ahead (Pubugou). And in the instance of the Three Gorges project, the opposition had potent issue-framing resources and a compelling case but lacked policy entrepreneurs able to make that compelling case, in part because in this instance the government used a variety of means to stifle potential policy entrepreneurs like Dai Qing (p. 104).<sup>3</sup>

### *So What?*

Though principally domestic in character, Mertha's case studies have implications for China as an international actor and for those outside of China debating the direction in which the Chinese polity is heading. This study has implications for what the outside world can expect in terms of Chinese behavior and how the world community should think about changes in the PRC—there is policy relevance for Americans and others in this slim volume.

One conclusion to which Mertha comes is that if environmentalists and the pluralized policy process in China slow down the ability of Beijing to implement energy projects that do not rely on coal (hydro and nuclear projects, for example), this will force China to fall back on its default energy—coal. Coal increasingly is being recognized as having serious global (as well as domestic) externalities; the degree to which domestic political paralysis prevents China from moving away from coal will be the degree to which

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<sup>3</sup> Dai Qing, *The River Dragon Has Come! The Three Gorges Dam and the Fate of China's Yangtze River and Its People* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); and Dai Qing, *Yangtze! Yangtze!* (London: Earthscan, 1994).

China has added opportunity for conflict with the international community, not the least with the United States that seemingly is becoming progressively more committed to CO2 emission reductions on a global basis.

Mertha could make an even broader related point. As China becomes more pluralized and constrained by domestic fragmentation, the outside world may find it progressively more difficult to get PRC cooperation in a number of areas that inflict costs on well-organized constituencies within China. In short, not all good things necessarily come from pluralization, though on balance it is to be welcomed as a means by which to expand political participation and generate policy more reflective of the balance of forces in society.

This brings us to a second major point with particular meaning for Americans at this moment when Washington is trying to bring national resources into better balance with national commitments, particularly Washington's commitments to political change around the world as most dramatically given expression in George W. Bush's second inaugural address. One task with respect to China, therefore, is to first realize what is happening in the PRC itself. As Mertha puts it:

It is my belief that focusing on democratization in China has prevented us from understanding the degree of political liberalization that is taking place right in front of our eyes. But if we shift our conceptual lens away from democratization and analyze instead political pluralization...the picture changes significantly. (pp. 151–52)

The biggest takeaways from Mertha's study for Americans may be that China gradually is heading in the direction of a more responsive polity, a more constrained leadership; one cannot, however, expect that more pluralization will always translate into more international cooperation or Chinese behavior more aligned with U.S. interests. If this is true, maybe the unspoken bottom line is that Americans need to spend somewhat less time worrying about China's political direction and somewhat more time asking what change in China requires in terms of change in the United States.

## Shifting Openings and Trap Doors in the Maze of China's Hydropower Policy Processes

Anna Brettell

In China's Water Warriors, Andrew Mertha explores the policy development processes in three cases of large hydroelectric development projects in China—the Pubugou, the Yangliuhu (Dujiangyan), and Nu River dams—as a means to assert that “new dynamics have emerged” in Chinese political processes.<sup>1</sup> Mertha's work makes a contribution to the scholarly literature on policy processes in China by suggesting that the model of “fragmented authoritarianism” could be more dynamic by expanding it to include additional actors, sub-provincial officials, the media, NGOs, and individual activists.<sup>2</sup>

These actors, Mertha declares, “have successfully entered the political process precisely by adopting the strategies necessary to work within the constraints of the FA [fragmented authoritarian] framework” (p. 157). He asserts that in two of his case studies some of these actors became “policy entrepreneurs” and that these policy entrepreneurs were necessary to induce the reversal of two hydroelectric dam project decisions (one temporarily).<sup>3</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup> Mertha omits an explicit explanation for why, out of the universe of possible cases, he chose the three cases of focus. China has built 250–371 hydroelectric dams annually over the last two decades, and there are 23,000 large-scale dams in operation in China. See China's response to the World Commission on Dam's 2001 report, February 15, 2001, available at the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) website ≈ <http://www.unep.org/dams/documents/default.asp?documentid=464>.

<sup>2</sup> Fragmented authoritarianism is a model of policymaking useful in analyzing policy development and change in China in the 1980s and 1990s. Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg discuss this model in *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Mertha's valid assertion is that concepts from the literature typically utilized to understand policy change in democratic countries can be useful in analyzing policy change in China. Mertha borrows John Kingdon's definition of policy entrepreneurs as entrepreneurs who are “advocates for proposals or for the prominence of an idea...and could be in or out of government, in elected or appointed positions, in interest groups or research organizations.” See John W. Kingdon, *Agenda, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 122–23, quoted by Mertha on p. 6. Mertha's discussion of policy entrepreneurs in China would have been strengthened if he had included an analysis of the conditions conducive to their rise. Readers should keep in mind, however, that when applied to policy processes in the United States, the concepts of policy entrepreneurs, issue framing, and broad support for policy change are parts of more elaborate theories to explain basic, broad policy formation and change. Mertha could make addition contributions in suggesting ways to modify the models and broader theories for application in China.

further claims that “while policy entrepreneurship appears to be a necessary condition for policy change, it alone does not guarantee that such policy change will occur” (p. 23). According to Mertha, policy entrepreneurship combined with “issue framing” that links “coalitions and broad-based support” can “overwhelm the official state frame used to legitimize the policy in the first place” and will guarantee that policy change shall occur (p. 23).<sup>4</sup>

More generally, Mertha maintains his research illustrates that “political pluralism can take place within—indeed, influence—the policy process in single-party, authoritarian China” (p. xv) and that political processes governing hydropower policy in China are becoming more like those in democratic countries (p. 24).<sup>5</sup> Finally, in the book’s conclusion, Mertha warns the reader about the international implications of his research findings in relation to global competition over energy resources.

Mertha’s overall approach in assessing political reform by examining specific project decisions is refreshing, and our understanding of the complexities of policy processes in China would benefit if, as the book suggests, scholars of Chinese policy were to include an examination of the roles of sub-provincial officials, the media, NGOs, and individual activists when utilizing the fragmented authoritarian model. Though it is clear sub-provincial officials have become more successful in protecting their interests and actuating their policy preferences, they should not be lumped together in the same category as NGOs and activists.<sup>6</sup> Nonstate actors, in their own category, need to be considered in the fragmented authoritarian model—not necessarily because these actors always do have an impact on policy but because some of them are claiming they do.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Although Mertha argues that a successful alternative media frame overwhelms the official “state framing,” this seems like a rather tautological argument. Later, he suggests that successful policy framing involves an infusion of new information at a critical time that reduces one group’s hold on a policy monopoly or involves reorganizing information to “reframe” an issue. This seems like a more useful conceptualization, but is somewhat at odds with the previous statement: it implies that an issue frame could be successful, yet still may not “overwhelm” the state frame. In addition, it is possible that state framing has not so much declined as has become softer and more sophisticated.

<sup>5</sup> One could ask that if China is liberalizing, which among other things could include becoming more responsive to citizens, why did officials in the Pubugou case disregard the overwhelming local demands for adequate compensation. One could also ask why there are so many “mass incidents” and public protests in China in general. For a more nuanced discussion of the statistics on protests and mass incidents than is found on p. 17 of *China’s Water Warriors*, refer to the “Statistics of Mass Incidence” entry on the EastSouthWestNorth blog ~> [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20061115\\_1.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20061115_1.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Lumping sub-provincial officials, the media, NGOs, and independent activists into one category may lead to distortions in perspective because these actors do not necessarily operate within the same context or have the same access to financial, informational, and other resources that enable them to become policy entrepreneurs or influence policy.

<sup>7</sup> Mertha’s discussion of the bureaucratic organizations involved in dam construction and opposition is very useful. The section in the same chapter on NGOs, however, is not as detailed, accurate, or clear.

Mertha too often conflates specific project outcomes with broad, basic policy decisions and political processes in general. Asking readers to believe that China's "political processes" have "liberalized" to include NGOs and activists does not seem justified based on the small number of case studies and the suppression faced by the individuals involved.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that some measure of "liberalization," or more aptly "reform," in authoritarian China is not possible, because we have already seen it with the expansion of political space for relatively independent NGOs and the introduction of village elections, however flawed they may be. In an increasingly complex China, however, pointing to a few specific cases to justify claims of liberalization (or lack thereof) is tempting, but without widespread and regular change it is hard to claim "politics" in China have "liberalized" to include NGOs and activists.<sup>9</sup>

It should also be pointed out that in arguing the "putative goal [of nonstate actors] may well be to change not politics but policy" (p. xv), Mertha overlooks the possibility that nonstate actors, in addition to seeking a specific project outcome, may indeed have a political goal; they may be seeking to expand the political space for meaningful and regular public participation in policymaking processes precisely because that space is still so limited.

The media, NGOs, and activists in Beijing and other major cities have indeed become more confident and proactive both in pushing for more political space and in voicing policy concerns and preferences across a

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<sup>8</sup> On pp. 151–52 Mertha briefly discusses the relationship between participation in policy decisions and political liberalization, but considering that a great deal of the book's more general arguments rest on the definitions of political pluralization and liberalization, his claims would be bolstered if he had expanded his discussion of these terms and linked this discussion to the literature on political liberalization, authoritarian deliberation, and public participation. This is crucial because he hedges his claim of political liberalization slightly in his conclusion on p. 158. The author simplifies the extensive literature on democratization, liberalization, and public participation in relation to China, which detracts from the framing of his research in relation to the broader literature (p. 151–52).

<sup>9</sup> It is understandable how developments in the well-known cases in places like Wenzhou, Wenling, and Shenzhen would lead scholars to see a liberalizing China, but these cases are not the norm. These locations are often the sites of specific demonstration projects, most of which never expand to other areas. Some of China's numerous demonstration projects are funded by foreign foundations or other entities. For example, the participatory budgeting and "democratic consultation" projects in Wenling are isolated experiments that have been funded by a U.S. foundation. Lily Tsai's research on informal accountability institutions offers more reliable evidence regarding widespread practices. See Lily Tsai, "The Struggle for Village Public Goods Provision: Informal Institutions of Accountability in Rural China," in *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China*, ed. Elizabeth Perry and Merle Goldman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 117–48.



wide range of issues.<sup>10</sup> These same actors, however, often retreat as the line between what is acceptable and what is not shifts.<sup>11</sup> It is premature to assert that a fundamental change in Chinese politics has taken place or that political pluralism, traditionally defined, is occurring; this is partially because in many situations, those that do speak out still face possible detention, arrest, harassment, job termination, eviction, and a myriad of other threats from officials.<sup>12</sup> In the case studies that Mertha presents, experts likely faced job termination for engaging in dam controversy and authorities threatened to close the activists' NGOs. Students were barred from conducting social impact analyses in watersheds, and media blackouts stifled news. In addition, some activists had their international travel privileges revoked and are still barred from visiting select river basins.

Mertha mentions some of these official efforts to constrain the actions of activists in his case studies but dismisses this suppression when articulating his conclusions. He repeatedly describes the "political cover" that policy entrepreneurs in two of the cases gained vis-à-vis their international attention, their family or revolutionary backgrounds, or media and other connections. Although he states this political cover was necessary to prevent officials from shutting down NGOs or to preserve an activist's "presence in the limelight," in his conclusions he does not take into account these detractors from political space. The fact that policy entrepreneurs require such political cover suggests that conditions in China may not be ripe for non-governmental policy entrepreneurs to emerge in more than just a handful of cases.<sup>13</sup> In addition,

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<sup>10</sup> In some regions of China, especially along the coast and in provincial capitals, fundamental conditions are more conducive to public activism and have led to greater confidence on the part of activists: communication channels have improved, making it harder to cover up issues and easier to form coalitions; citizens are less economically dependent on the state, making relatively independent environmental NGOs more likely; and citizens are better educated and more willing to express their preferences, despite the risks.

<sup>11</sup> As Mertha notes, conditions for environmental groups shifted in 2005—when authorities conducted a thorough review of NGO activities, funding sources, and attitudes toward the government—and in 2007 several NGOs were warned against being too critical of the government. The recent sidelining of Pan Yue, one of the deputy directors in the Ministry of Environmental Protection, illustrates the political consequences of being too outspoken. See Jonathan Ansfield, "Slump Tilts Priorities of Industry in China," *New York Times*, April 18, 2009 ~ [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/19/world/asia/19china.html?\\_r=1&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/19/world/asia/19china.html?_r=1&hp).

<sup>12</sup> Mertha briefly notes on p. 152 that intolerance for "dissent" is still the dominant paradigm, yet he does not include a discussion of how the pluralization of policy processes can coexist with this dominant paradigm. In addition, a great deal of official suppression remains hidden; foreigners and even ordinary Chinese citizens often are not aware of the "chats" with security personnel and the myriad of threats activists face because those activists are warned not to mention them. Even some foreign scholars may feel nervous about being critical of the Chinese government or its policies for fear of the consequences, namely losing access to China.

<sup>13</sup> By contrast, in democratic countries, conditions allowing for the rise of policy entrepreneurs seem to be relatively consistent, existing at all administrative levels and in both urban and rural areas.

Mertha seems to imply in chapter one that alternative issue framing is possible, except when involving Falun Gong and the three T's—Tibet, Taiwan, and Tiananmen (p. 14). If that were true, Chinese leaders would be spending a great deal less energy and money on censorship measures, the “great firewall,” and various efforts to “guide” public opinion.<sup>14</sup>

Mertha focuses on perceived differences between the activism surrounding the Three Gorges Dam in the 1980s and 1990s and the activism in the three case studies in this book in order to illustrate that conditions in China are different today. Yet one could just as easily focus on the similarities.<sup>15</sup> For example, Dai Qing has remarked that the publication of *Yangtze! Yangtze!* in early 1989, as well as widespread concern over the negative aspects of the Three Gorges Dam, slowed the momentum toward approval of that project.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Mertha contrasts the suppression of activists in the 1990s and today; although he states that 179 people were imprisoned for opposing the Three Gorges Dam (p. 2), the number of people imprisoned is likely far smaller. Besides Dai Qing, only a limited number of citizens arrested for petitioning in Beijing over resettlement issues actually served prison time.<sup>17</sup> Mertha also notes that Dai Qing's book, which is critical of the Three Gorges Dam, was banned—an action that he contrasts with the open media environment surrounding the Nu River Dam project. Dai Qing's book was not, however, banned immediately after publication; the book was only banned after June 4, 1989, when Dai's opponents were able to claim Dai had ulterior motives for publishing the book, pointing to her participation in demonstrations at Tiananmen Square. Vocal opposition to the Three Gorges Dam entered the public sphere in the 1980s and 1990s through many news articles, at least two

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<sup>14</sup> On censorship, see Rebecca MacKinnon, “China's Censorship 2.0: How Companies Censor Bloggers,” *First Monday* 14, no. 2 (February 2, 2009) ~ <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2378/2089>; on media reporting, see David Bandurski, “Media Scholar Urges End to Ban on Cross-Regional Reporting” China Media Project ~ <http://cmp.hku.hk/2009/04/09/1553/>; and on guiding public opinion, see David Bandurski, “China's Guerrilla War for the Web,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 171, no. 6 (July 2008): 41–44 ~ <http://www.feer.com/essays/2008/august/chinas-guerrilla-war-for-the-web>.

<sup>15</sup> This is not to imply that conditions today are identical to those in the 1980s or even the 1990s.

<sup>16</sup> Patricia Adams and Philip Williams, “Opposition to an Unviable Dam,” introduction to Dai Qing, *Yangtze, Yangtze!* ed. Patricia Adams and Philip Williams (London: Probe International, 1994) ~ [http://www.threegorgesprobe.org/pi/documents/three\\_gorges/Yangtze/intro.html](http://www.threegorgesprobe.org/pi/documents/three_gorges/Yangtze/intro.html).

<sup>17</sup> For information on petitioners, see “Three Gorges: Human Rights Abuse,” International Rivers Network, IRN Release, February 2003 ~ [http://www.cleanganga.com/articles/feb03/human\\_rights.php](http://www.cleanganga.com/articles/feb03/human_rights.php); and Patricia Adams, “Environmental NGOs in China: Encouraging Action and Addressing Public Grievances,” testimony at the Congressional-Executive Commission on China roundtable, February 7, 2005 ~ <http://www.cecc.gov/pages/roundtables/020705/Adams.php>.

books other than Dai Qing's, and several alternative proposals for the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.<sup>18</sup>

Though there is insufficient space to delve into the details of each of the case studies, some aspects of the Dujiangyan case should be examined. In this case, which is the one example in which dam opponents were successful, hydroelectric companies built the upper larger Zipingpu Dam<sup>19</sup> but not the lower smaller Yangliuhu Dam closer to the ancient Dujiangyan irrigation system.<sup>20</sup> It is puzzling that Mertha does not ascribe the policy entrepreneur role to local government and party officials and to representatives from the Dujiangyan UNESCO World Heritage Office instead of to the two journalists/activists, Zhang Kejia and Wang Yongchen. Based on the reprinting of their news articles, there is no doubt that Zhang and Wang's reporting succeeded in raising national awareness of the issues surrounding the dam. Unlike the Nu River case, however, Zhang and Wang became involved in efforts to stop the Yangliuhu Dam only at the urging of Dujiangyan officials and only in the two months prior to the final announcement that dam plans would be scratched. Mertha states that after illegal construction on the lower Yangliuhu Dam was detected, the local Dujiangyan officials continued to "bring the issue to national attention and to mobilize the press" (p. 102). In addition, the "cultural heritage frame" utilized by the two journalists was not new: it was also raised in opposition to the Zipingpu Dam as early as 2002 but had failed to influence construction plans. As Kristen McDonald points out, the role of local officials is crucial to the outcome of dam politics and they may be the real "water warriors."<sup>21</sup> This seems to ring true in the Dujiangyan case.

In the concluding chapter of *China's Water Warriors*, Mertha moves outside the scope of his research and discusses an international implication of

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<sup>18</sup> Dai, *Yangtze, Yangtze!* chaps. 1, 3.

<sup>19</sup> The Zipingpu Dam was completed in 2006 and was damaged as a result of the May 2008 earthquake. See Edward Wong and John Schwartz, "Chinese Soldiers Rush to Bolster Weakened Dams," *New York Times*, May 15, 2008 ~ <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/15/world/asia/15china.html>.

<sup>20</sup> According to Mertha's account, officials had already decided to build the Zipingpu Dam and to "table" discussions of the Yangliuhu Dam in 2000. Mertha provides a list of government and party organizations that opposed construction of the lower Yangliuhu Dam, and news articles provide additional agencies. See "Taming the Floodwaters: The High Heritage Price of Massive Hydraulic Projects," China Heritage Project, China Heritage Newsletter, no. 1, March 2005 ~ [http://www.chinaheritageneewsletter.org/features.php?searchterm=001\\_water.inc&issue=001](http://www.chinaheritageneewsletter.org/features.php?searchterm=001_water.inc&issue=001).

<sup>21</sup> Kristen McDonald, "Hydropower on the Nu: One River, Many Perspectives," China Dialogue, March 19, 2008 ~ <http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/1816-Hydropower-on-the-Nu-one-river-many-perspectives>. Mertha also does not address alternative hypotheses in any detail in the book's case studies, most glaringly the role of scientific considerations, beyond their being used as issue frames, or the roles of international factors and organizations.

his findings.<sup>22</sup> He asks readers to accept his assertions about the implications of a pluralized hydroelectric policy process in China for global competition over energy resources. He states that “insofar as China limits its exploitation of [domestic] hydropower, it increases its tendency toward reliance on coal and other nonrenewable sources of energy...imposing more—not fewer—constraints on China’s energy choices” (p. 160). Furthermore, he argues that “as China becomes less authoritarian, it may actually become more confrontational with the United States and other democracies over satisfying its growing energy needs” (pp. 161–62).

Mertha is correct when he states that because of the importance of energy for China’s continued development, many officials in China would be more likely to try to “curtail the role of these oppositional elements to hydropower policy” (p. 161). China’s overall energy planning decisions, however, are not likely to change significantly because of opposition to a few specific large dams, and China will not be confined to the limited energy choices Mertha suggests. What he fails to consider is that the advocates in his cases are not completely opposed to dams and would likely accept smaller dams, if social justice and environmental issues were given due consideration. When built in greater numbers, smaller dams could provide the same amount of energy that fewer larger dams would provide. In addition, if one proposed location does become infeasible, dam proponents typically turn their attention to an alternate locality. Consider, for example, the Tiger Leaping Gorge case. As plans for the Tiger Leaping Gorge Dam fell through, dam proponents found a new location for the dam farther upstream in Tibetan areas, where, among other factors, the suppression of opposition is less visible to outsiders and easier to justify.<sup>23</sup> Mertha also disregards China’s advances in energy efficiency and clean coal technologies as well as the role of renewable and nuclear sources of energy for China.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> One international implication that Mertha could have discussed, but did not, is how international groups can help strengthen nonstate actors in China who are seeking to expand the political space within which to operate and influence policy. Many U.S. agencies, companies, and NGOs too often cooperate only with the Chinese state in a wide range of programs precisely because many Chinese authorities do not allow or dissuade actors from including nonstate groups in these programs and projects. There would be many benefits for all involved if U.S. actors were to use their leverage to expand the range of groups with whom they cooperate in China. For example, U.S.-China ties would benefit from deeper and more varied contacts.

<sup>23</sup> Malcolm Moore, “China Plans Dams across Tibet,” *Telegraph*, October 14, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> See “China’s Clean Revolution,” Climate Group ~ [http://www.theclimategroup.org/assets/resources/Chinas\\_Clean\\_Revolution.pdf](http://www.theclimategroup.org/assets/resources/Chinas_Clean_Revolution.pdf); “Beyond Three Gorges in China,” *International Water Power & Dam Construction*, January 10, 2007 ~ <http://www.waterpowermagazine.com/story.asp?storyCode=2041318>; and “China Eyes Massive Hike in Atomic Energy Target,” ABC (Australia Broadcasting Corporation) News, February 4, 2009 ~ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/02/04/2482534.htm>.

In conclusion, the value of *China's Water Warriors* lies in pointing out the need to include additional actors within the fragmented authoritarian model and in suggesting scholars expand the range of models they use to understand policymaking in China. Mertha, however, reaches too far in arguing Chinese politics have liberalized and nonstate actors are already influential players in China's policy processes.<sup>25</sup> While agreeing that sub-provincial officials have become more powerful and that policy processes have become more dynamic, it is too early to assert the increasing efforts of a limited number of nonstate actors to influence project outcomes, which such actors take at considerable personal and profession risk, is evidence that China's political processes have "pluralized" to include NGOs and activists.

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<sup>25</sup> A popular case for asserting media and NGO influence in policy processes is the case of Sun Zhigang, wherein a fashion designer was beaten to death in a detention center following being held by police for not having a *hukou* (household registration) permit for Guangzhou. The resulting public outcry and the efforts of scholars led to a change in policy on paper, but not in state practice. In addition to fierce public outcry, scholars Xu Zhiyong, Yu Jiang, and Teng Biao sent a joint suggestion to the National People's Congress urging review of the Custody and Repatriation system (Act on Housing and Transferring Urban Homeless). The Congress did not conduct the review but the act was rescinded shortly thereafter. It was replaced, however, by Measures for Assisting Vagrants and Beggars with No Means of Support in Cities. The practice of jailing petitioners and others in "black jails" and centers for "education classes" continues. Although Chinese leaders denied the existence of "black jails" during China's universal periodic review by the UN Human Rights Council, increasing evidence suggests these jails are common in Beijing and other locations. See, for example, China Human Rights Defenders, "'Black Jails' in the Host City of the 'Open Olympics,'" September 21, 2007 ~ [http://www.crd-net.org/Article/Class9/Class11/200709/20070921161949\\_5739.html](http://www.crd-net.org/Article/Class9/Class11/200709/20070921161949_5739.html); and China Human Rights Defenders, "'Black Jails': China's Growing Network of Illegal and Secret Detention Facilities," October 19, 2008 ~ [http://crd-net.org/Article/Class9/Cla ss15/200810/20081019220335\\_11238.html](http://crd-net.org/Article/Class9/Cla ss15/200810/20081019220335_11238.html).

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## Anti-Dam Campaigns and Transforming State-Society Relations: Citizen Action and Policy Change in China's Hydraulic Society

*Teh-chang Lin*

Farmers, one might say, are agents of change in China, as they helped initiate the economic reforms of the 1980s. The rapid transformation of state-society relations in post-1990s China also has been brought about by the pluralization of Chinese society in general, and by the emergence of civil society in particular, with farmers having played an indispensable role in

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civil society opposition to local dam projects. The inception of civil society in China not only provides us with a new perspective in examining the changing interactive patterns between state and society, but, in terms of methodology, also offers additional concrete indicators with which to closely measure how society confronts the state. China's "hydraulic society," defined as the various public and private constituents involved in anti-dam campaigns, thus provides a very good case with which to bridge the gap between empirical studies and theory-based understandings of state-society relations.<sup>1</sup>

In *China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change*, Andrew C. Mertha examines three case studies—the anti-dam campaigns in Pubugou, Dujiangyan, and the Nu River—in an attempt to analyze and explain the factors that may contribute to the success or failure of each campaign. This is indeed a very inspired study. There is no doubt that China's political, economic, and social development has received great attention by scholars around the world. And scholars have perceived many events in China as being unique, in part due to the view that China's peculiar historical context is not well-suited to interpretation by conventional theories. Consequently, China's hydraulic society presents an intriguing case for academic researchers. Because of the rapid, varied, and significant changes in the political process in China after the 1980s, Mertha has needed to revise, extend, and deepen the traditional "fragmented authoritarianism" model as an analytical framework

In examining the anti-dam campaigns in China, Mertha begins by conceptualizing policy entrepreneurs and issue framing as an explanatory framework in which three anti-dam campaigns are applied. According to the author, policy entrepreneurs can be defined as disgruntled officials, enterprises, the media, NGOs, and grass-roots organizations.

Compared to the conventional view that the political process in China is highly authoritarian, the movements in Pubugou, Dujiangyan, and the Nu River demonstrate not only the emergence of a pluralized society but also the presence of a wider variety of stakeholders, with interwoven interests, who interact and engage in the process of decisionmaking on dam construction. In general, the issues involved in anti-dam campaigns include economic development, resettlement, compensation, human rights, public awareness, cultural relic preservation, and environmental protection; this diverse range of issues in turn implies a sophisticated and diversified set of interactions

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<sup>1</sup> Teh-chang Lin and Yen-Chun Lin, "Environmental Civil Society and the Transformation of State-Society Relations in China: Building a Tri-level Analytical Framework," *Pacific Focus* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 113–40; and Teh-chang Lin, "Environmental NGOs and Anti-Dam Movements in China: A Social Movement with Chinese Characteristics," *Issues & Studies* 43, no. 4 (December 2007): 149–84.

between the state and society. As a result, the line can no longer be easily drawn in determining the boundary between state and society. Even the interests that central and various local governments pursue are no longer so identical.

Additionally, the involvement of the media and NGOs in framing the issue further enhances the intensity of the anti-dam campaigns by generating more public sympathy and support across the country. Mertha's comparative study of Pubugou, Dujiangyan, and the Nu River shows that issue framing was greatly facilitated by the media and NGOs in two instances: Dujiangyan and the Nu River. In Pubugou, the outlier case, the media could not become involved because the government identified the campaign as a political incident, which by definition posed a threat and challenge to the Chinese Communist Party. Furthermore, the Pubugou case lacked a coherent set of policy entrepreneurs and NGOs interested in the case, which no doubt further weakened both the magnitude and intensity of the opposition. By contrast, in both the Dujiangyan and Nu River examples, NGOs, the World Heritage Office, UNESCO, and the Cultural Relics, Seismological, and Environmental Protection Bureaus were active policy advocates who added momentum to the anti-dam campaigns. The media and NGOs work hand in hand to formulate and then consolidate the issue in the public discourse—a dynamic that increased the power of the opposition to the dam construction in both cases.

Another differentiating factor in these cases was the focus of advocacy efforts. In the case of Pubugou, the opposition highlighted the issue of resettlement. Although clearly a legitimate issue in anti-dam movements around the world, resettlement is linked to human rights issues, which Beijing has viewed as a challenge to the state and the party. In the Dujiangyan and Nu River cases, however, preserving both cultural heritage and the environment were the major appeals the opposition made. These campaigns highlighted the beauty and geographical uniqueness of China, appealing to nationalistic sentiments among the public. This focus ultimately placed the government in an awkward situation and handicapped the government from taking effective action to suppress the opposition.

This book provides useful observations regarding citizen action and policy change in China's hydraulic society under an authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, one major weakness of the book is that it does not endeavor to systematically conceptualize state-society relations in China. This reviewer would argue that the most important theoretical framework to use in interpreting China's political, economic, and social development after the 1980s must focus on state-society relations. As a research framework, relations

between China's state and society can be said to define the boundaries of civil society, leading us to observe and explain the interactions between the most important actors. For instance, the national government enacted two regulations on the registration and management of social organizations in 1989 and 1998, respectively, which subsequently conditioned the scope and the nature of civil society organizations in China and succinctly foreshadowed the outcomes of interaction between the state and society. Without the ability to trace and explain the transformation of state-society relations, we are unable to fully explain the possible policy outcomes in the case studies of Pubugou, Dujiangyan, and the Nu River.

The emergence of social organizations in the 1980s was the initial spark behind the transformation of state-society relations in China. It is clear that NGOs are increasingly playing crucial roles in mobilizing the people and enhancing public awareness of the impact of dam projects. The emerging environmental movement in China does, however, avoid confrontational methods, espousing instead markedly non-radical approaches that encourage learning, cooperation, participation, and dialogue. China's environmental NGOs (ENGOS) deliberately tend to keep their distance from any large-scale, organized confrontational activity against the state, a feature of the corporatist model. The Dujiangyan and Nu River cases illustrate this point well.

Another feature of anti-dam campaigns in China is international linkages, which did not receive enough attention in the book. One major reason for the enhancement of linkages between Chinese and international NGOs is that the former present an important means by which the latter are able to conduct projects in China. Moreover, although the presence of international NGOs in China is relatively recent, they have had a visible influence on Chinese ENGOS. International environmental organizations have formed advocacy networks with their nationally based counterparts in order both to spread information regarding environmental problems and to exert pressure for policy change across national borders. The internationalization of environmental politics has also led to the transfer of funds for environmental protection to developing countries. In the Dujiangyan and Nu River cases, dam projects attracted international attention from groups such as UNESCO, Probe International, and the International Rivers Network. This internationalization helps explain the success of the campaigns against the government's plans. International involvement has transformed state-society relations in China from a bilateral domestic relationship into a triangular one where domestic society combines with international society to collectively pressure the Chinese government.



International linkages have thus contributed to bringing about different policy outcomes in these anti-dam campaigns.

Finally, yet another major contribution of international NGOs is their introduction of international norms, such as human rights and social justice, into China. The Chinese government realizes that if it takes action against domestic NGOs that implicitly or explicitly support anti-dam campaigns, Beijing will be criticized for violating international norms, thereby damaging China's international image. Consequently, China has refrained from carrying out a violent crackdown on environmental movements.

In sum, there has been a compromise between NGOs and the state—whereby both sides stress cooperation and dialogue rather than provocative or violent confrontation—that has resulted in a new phenomenon: social movements “with Chinese characteristics.” Understanding this unique form of social movement in China should help reader's better understand the anti-dam campaigns and the patterns of interaction between the state and the society in Mertha's comparative study of the Pubugou, Dujiangyan, and the Nu River cases.

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## China's Warriors Are Handicapped

*Yawei Liu*

Andrew C. Mertha's *China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change* is certainly a compelling sell, given the back cover's display of endorsements by several leading China experts. Challenging the seminal thesis of “fragmented authoritarianism” is also very intriguing. Moreover, the volume is a timely and important investigation into public activism in the area of policymaking in a non-democratic society. Mertha examines three exciting stories on the process of building (or not building) dams and uses the high drama staged by strong-willed government officials, profit-seeking power *xitong*,<sup>1</sup> and courageous water warriors to show that the Oksenberg-Lieberthal thesis is a bit dated. Perhaps even more fascinating are the

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<sup>1</sup> Power *xitong* includes (1) state owned companies that are responsible for producing and transmitting power, (2) government officials, particularly those at the top, who used to work in the state power management administration, and (3) children of those officials who are working in power regulation agencies or utility holding companies.

conclusions of the book, which may force China watchers to reassess China's political transformation in the context of economic development and societal adjustment.

Mertha's overall claim is that China is moving toward a more liberal state-society relationship and that any decisions made either by the central government or by local governments are subject to challenges from other sectors or interest groups. Mertha's original application of concepts and ideas from the field of U.S. politics—such as policy entrepreneurs and issue framing—is very useful because they provide a neat lens for analyzing why more violent demonstrations failed to change a government decision to build a dam in Hanyuan whereas relatively moderate protests succeeded in reversing the decision in Dujiangyan and delaying the decision concerning the Nu River.<sup>2</sup>

Mertha's book should be complimented for two major achievements: first, it contributes to a better and more precise interpretation of China's often secretive and opaque decisionmaking process; second, it reaffirms the view that, although still authoritarian in name and nature, public space in China has widened almost beyond recognition. No major decisions can be made and implemented without question from the people, the supposed benefactors of government decisions. Indeed, the most memorable part of the book addresses the fact that unprecedented citizen questioning of government decisions has led to different policy outcomes, such as reversing decisions and delaying the implementation of decisions, or at the very least to more explanation of the rationale behind decisions. Although the book does indicate how easily and frequently those who are organizing or orchestrating such questioning can be punished by the government, Mertha very convincingly proves that any claim that the Chinese government still implements policies without criticism and debate is misguided.

Mertha artfully places the three small stories into the larger context of China's present challenges. The first challenge is that the market economy has effectively fragmented both the Chinese government and Chinese society. Second, the market-dependent media has the burden of constantly finding stories that not only meet the reading appetite of the people but also provide

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<sup>2</sup> Although still not conclusive, some have suggested that the dams built in Hanyuan and other areas in Sichuan might have contributed to the earthquake that took place on May 12, 2008. People now have certainly forgotten the heroic efforts by the villagers to stop the dam from being built. Had Zhang Xuezhong, the then provincial party secretary, forgiven the farmers for surrounding him in a house near the dam and reversed the decision to build the dam, many more lives could have been saved. At the very least, the government could have saved the money spent on releasing water from some of the reservoirs in the wake of the earthquake.

checks and balances to the government working in collusion with the state power *xitong*. The third challenge is that the increasing “invasion” of public space in China by international organizations and the ideas they advance are causing Chinese leaders at different levels to “look before they leap,” given that perceived violations of international norms may damage China’s reputation in the international community. Finally, the most important new players in China’s policymaking arena are increasingly suspicious citizens who have lost unconditional trust in the government; are well-informed, strategically-placed, and politically savvy; and have the ability to mobilize others when the government appears to be wobbling. A major accomplishment of Mertha’s book is to point out problems in the logic of both the so-called blue-teamers and the panda huggers. The thesis of the former, that the Chinese government is a monolith bent on suppressing all challenges to the leaders, is outright wrong; the belief of the latter, that China is already democratizing, is patently misleading.

The book provides a riveting account of the importance of building up hydraulic power in developing China’s vast and water-rich west—one that describes how the efforts to build dams are set against the complex interactions between local residents, government officials, power *xitong*, and NGOs. Mertha calls those who are trying to force the government to reverse or delay dam building decisions “water warriors.” Indeed, it takes courage, vision, skill, and resourcefulness to declare war on a government that is often arbitrary and takes every action in the name of the people and the state. Living under constant threat of being accused by the “omnipotent government” of instigating sedition or fostering social instability, these warriors do fight and sometimes win battles despite being heavily disadvantaged vis-à-vis the state. One painful irony of Mertha’s three stories is that these warriors cannot win on the issue most fundamental to any rational and normal state: deprivation of economic benefits. The failure of the Hanyuan farmers (and by the same token the Dongzhou farmers in Guangdong) was largely caused by their single-minded pursuit of economic compensation. On the other hand, the Dujiangyan and Nu River naysayers were successful because they fought the battle in the name of preserving heritage and protecting the environment.

Bringing in another case may help refine this hypothesis. In 2005 farmers in Dongyang City, Zhejiang, demonstrated against environmental pollution. The government mobilized thousands of employees and security personnel to forcefully remove the farmers who had occupied the roads leading to local chemical plants. I imagine Mertha might argue that the farmers in Dongyang failed not because of the issue but due to their radical tactics. These citizens

erred the same way the farmers in Hanyuan had: by adopting the method of civil disobedience (seizing the road in Dongyang and occupying the dam building site in Hanyuan). Could we then argue that the Chinese government is going through a slow pluralization of its decisionmaking process but is still a wayward government that does not accept any citizen demonstration that appears to make it lose face? Civil disobedience proved to be effective in winning independence for India, triggering desegregation in the United States, and ending apartheid in South Africa; the fate of such action in China seems fragile, however, as the government can always crack down in the name of maintaining social and political stability.

On the other hand, if “warrior” is meant in a more abstract sense—as a label given to those Chinese citizens who have managed to force the government at various levels to reverse a decision or who have created such social momentum that a certain claim must be disputed—then there are too many such warriors inside China to count. “Election warriors” in Shenzhen and Beijing ran as independent candidates in 2003 and won. “Zoo warriors” and “imperial garden warriors” in Beijing managed to reverse the decision to relocate the zoo and to develop the ruins of Yuanmingyuan. “Internet warriors” in Yunnan used the Internet to overturn a provincial government’s claim that an inmate died by accident when playing hide and seek; other “Internet warriors” in Jiangsu forced the government to dismiss a district official for taking bribes. The sad truth is that as the number of these warriors increases, the arbitrariness of the government does not decline, nor does the government’s ability to suppress the warriors. The government knows full well how to frame the issue when it chooses to crack down.

A good case here is the government’s response to the media coverage of the earthquake in Sichuan last year. The government insisted that all media reports use the wire service of the Xinhua News Agency. The media, however, successfully framed the issue as covering a humanitarian disaster and ignored the propaganda department’s restriction from the very outset. The blanket coverage in the immediate wake of the earthquake focused on humanitarian rescue efforts and thus presented a picture of both a united people and a caring government working hand-in-hand to respond to a natural catastrophe. When the media began to shift focus, however, and report on issues such as civil-society building and the shoddy construction of school houses, the government stepped in to control media coverage—as it does on these issues to this very day. The government’s framing of the issue is exactly what Mertha has recorded so well in his book: in the eyes of the government, negative media coverage leads to social instability and political turmoil and therefore should not be permitted.

Mertha's book is an excellent exploration of how the originally fragmented, top-down decisionmaking process in China has further fragmented, becoming increasingly vulnerable to challenges from elite policy entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs are skilled and have found effective ways to frame their protests in order to subvert the proverbial control an authoritarian government can exercise. Yet, though the successes of these "warriors" are both numerous and memorable, policy entrepreneurs cannot fight battles alongside ordinary citizens or take on more fundamental issues. We cannot blame them. Their fights are delicate, cautious, and small because the government has become too adept at framing expanding popular participation or deepening protests as sinister plots to damage the interest of the people and the state.

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## Breaching the Dam

*Peter Ford*

If the title of Andrew Mertha's absorbing book suggests a narrow angle—a focus on the particular problems posed by the massive dams on which the Chinese government has pinned so many of its energy plans—the subtitle reveals the full scope of the author's enterprise. Mertha makes a prism out of dams, and the popular resistance dams often generate, to explore one of the great conundrums facing China and the people who watch it: Is today's authoritarianism indefinitely sustainable? Is anything resembling Western democracy likely to emerge? How much room can ordinary citizens carve for themselves from the granite prerogatives of the state?

Mertha makes a convincing case for the way in which the range of actors in Chinese public life is broadening and pluralizing politics. His account of how floating coalitions of academics, journalists, activists, and local people can form—and sometimes attract officials—to frustrate plans laid by a once-unmoveable state is fascinating.

Two of the three case studies he presents—all hydropower projects in southwestern China—were by no means simply stand-offs between a government seeking energy to power economic development and peasant farmers protesting eviction or demanding better compensation. Indeed, in

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the one instance where that remained the dynamic, the government got its way.

Injecting more uncertainty into the future of large-scale Chinese hydropower projects, however, are the environmental activists, the cultural heritage defenders, the professors, and the journalists who have learned to use the greater freedom of expression born of the Internet and the explosion of the Chinese press to push their agendas.

These are the “policy entrepreneurs” who do battle with the authorities to “frame issues” in ways favorable to their cause, to use the concepts Mertha applies. In the sporadic successes these entrepreneurs achieve, Mertha sees evidence of the way in which China’s budding civil society—expressing itself carefully—can sometimes impose itself in the face of state power. For this to happen, he argues, “what is necessary is simply the existence of a space in which groups can function without the threat of being shut down by the authorities” (p. 16), and at least minimal responsiveness to pressure on the part of those authorities.

As Mertha himself points out, however, in today’s China, “there is very limited space between state and society within which they [NGOs] can undertake effective action and hope for substantive results” (p. 61).

Mertha offers detailed and lively accounts of two public campaigns that have been fully or partially successful in derailing official plans: in Dujiangyan, Sichuan Province, the government simply abandoned a major dam project in the face of widespread opposition, and the giant Nu River project, conceived as a series of fourteen dams in some of Yunnan Province’s most spectacular scenery, has been on hold for several years.

The author describes these campaigns—which comprised public meetings, alternative scientific research, quiet lobbying, heavy media coverage, and skillful skirting around “red lines”—as evidence that “the barriers to entry into the political process,” by which one might distinguish liberal from illiberal regimes, “have been demonstrably lowered in China with regard to hydropower policy” (p. 158).

That is all very well, but once you are over the barriers, how far can you get? The stories Mertha tells suggest that this depends heavily on how the government, at all levels, chooses to react.

It is instructive that in the case of Pubugou, where local residents failed to stop construction of a dam, the government put up a firm, united, and determined front. Mertha is right to point out that the peasants lacked policy entrepreneurs and that they overstepped the mark by staging big

demonstrations that the authorities could brand as threats to sacred social stability.

But in his own accounts of the Dujiangyan and Nu River cases, Mertha draws attention to the way the authorities were divided. Different government agencies had different interests, different scientific experts held different opinions, and different levels of government attached different degrees of importance to the projects. One key reason for the activists' success in these two cases, it seems, was that the activists skillfully exploited these fissures, chiseling into them to shatter the state's determination. If the authorities had kept a more disciplined grip on the situation, they could probably have resisted their opponents. The state still holds almost all the good cards in this game, even if it cannot always play these cards to best effect.

Mertha is undoubtedly correct to point out the new roles that civic activists are creating for themselves in China, and we can all hope that the successes of activists will shed new light and breathe fresh air into a stultifying system.

The balance of power between these activists and the government, however, is clear even before the book begins. In the preface, where Mertha thanks all those to whom he owes a debt of gratitude, the "individuals in China" who make up the "dense network of activists, journalists, and sympathetic officials" and who are "a critical part of the story" have to remain anonymous for their own safety (p. xvi).

"Pluralization" clearly does not mean freedom.

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**Author's Response:**  
**China's Water Warriors—Returning to the Scene of Battle**

*Andrew Mertha*

My first year in China wound down abruptly on the night of June 3, 1989, when the tanks rolled into Beijing, killing hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of Beijing's citizens and breaking up the occupation of Tiananmen Square. I had left Beijing for Chengdu on May 5 and was one of the few foreign witnesses to the bloodshed that occurred in that city.<sup>1</sup> The events of June 3–4, 1989,

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<sup>1</sup> Karl L. Hutterer, "Chengdu Had Its Own Tiananmen Massacre," *New York Times*, June 23, 1989.

created a “before” and “after” bifurcation in the way I viewed Chinese politics and society from that point forward. In contrast to the growing chorus of those denouncing China, what I felt was a profound sense of loss. In the six years that I have lived and worked in China since then, never again would I be exposed to the unqualified (albeit naïve) sense of hope and optimism that so many Chinese people had exhibited about the future. This has colored my view of China ever since.

I was, therefore, not the most likely candidate to arrive at the conclusions that I did in *China’s Water Warriors*: that Chinese politics are slowly moving in a direction of increased pluralization within the policymaking process. Indeed, I subconsciously resisted this conclusion because it was inconsistent with my own biases. But over the course of almost three years of research, I reached a certain point where I could no longer deny what I was observing: the data that I gathered simply overwhelmed any cognitive dissonance on my part regarding China’s state-society relations. Do I think for a minute that China has left behind its unfortunate legacy of repression, unequal treatment of citizens, and arbitrary enforcement of laws, norms, and regulations? Of course not. But what I found does suggest that by continuing to view the People’s Republic of China (PRC) without updating assumptions that we might have formed in the 1980s and 1990s, we miss what is actually occurring in front of our eyes and in real time. Conceptually speaking, if we insist on conflating political liberalization with democratization, we face significant developments in China with blinders on, misinterpreting events that, ironically, China’s biggest critics would welcome: the gradual pluralization of the political process in the PRC.

I am both happy and humbled by the opportunity to have *China’s Water Warriors* analyzed and evaluated by such a stellar cast of scholars and policy analysts. Their interpretations are sophisticated and illuminating, and recast and reshape some of the concepts that I thought I had exhausted, breathing new life into them. I wish I had more space to give their remarks the consideration that is due, but I will try to respond as best as I can within the space constraints of this roundtable.

### *Implications and Generalizability*

As someone who undertakes field research under the rubric of qualitative research design, I spend hours, weeks, and even years accumulating enough data in order to make an argument I feel is credible. Given the time-intensive nature of such data collection, the trade-off I make is this: establish strong



internal validity (consistency between and among the cases studied) at the expense of external validity (the ability to generalize beyond the cases at hand). Moreover, given the almost paternal relationship I have with my data, I avoid devaluing it by making unsupportable claims to wider applicability. I hope to convince people of my argument based on the data that I present, not simply by my conclusions. Because I feel that it is better to err on the side of caution, my conclusions are necessarily guarded.

I am, therefore, encouraged that several of the commentators drew important larger lessons from this study than I had claimed. David Lampton modestly understates his own role as an intellectual forbearer not simply for *China's Water Warriors* but for my entire approach to analyzing Chinese politics. Not only is his work on political bargaining ("The Bargaining Treadmill") the premise upon which the "fragmented authoritarianism" framework is built, but his own early research, like that of Michel Oksenberg, also focused on water politics and policy.<sup>2</sup> Given Lampton's long-standing elite position in the Sino-U.S. policy community, I am particularly appreciative that he has in his contribution to this roundtable extended and deepened my own somewhat more tepid articulation:

As China becomes more pluralized and constrained by domestic fragmentation, the outside world may find it progressively more difficult to get PRC cooperation in a number of areas that inflict costs on well-organized constituencies within China. In short, not all good things necessarily come from pluralization.

But there are other areas to which one might extend this type of analysis. In an ideal world, other scholars might pick up the trail of inquiry and apply it to other policy areas. At recent conferences, I have been encouraged to see that others are in fact doing so. Yawei Liu suggests not simply other policy areas but other "levels of analysis" where one might test or evaluate the claims in *China's Water Warriors*. His identification of "election warriors," "imperial garden warriors,"<sup>3</sup> and "Internet warriors" is an important one. If these groups follow the same or similar dynamics as those I have identified, then this is the type of confirmation that will allow us to make more credible generalizations.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the most criminally under-placed and under-cited articles in the lexicon of Chinese politics is David M. Lampton, "Chinese Politics: The Bargaining Treadmill," *Issues & Studies* 23, no. 1 (March 1987). Moreover, Lampton's *Policy Implementation in Post-Mao China*, which should be a must-read for all China scholars, has long been out of print and is almost impossible to purchase. See David M. Lampton, *Policy Implementation in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Some of the actors involved in the Yuanmingyuan controversy were also involved in the Nujiang and Dujiangyan cases documented in *China's Water Warriors*.

If they do not, then it is important to understand why so that we do not overextend our collective findings.

### *The International Dimension*

Lampton's essay also foreshadows criticisms from Teh-chang Lin and Anna Brettell regarding the international dimension, specifically the curious absence of a larger discussion on international nongovernmental organizations (INGO) and international governmental organizations (IGO). Frankly, I think that much more work in this area is necessary before we have an accurate sense of what is actually occurring. However, contrary to my expectations that INGOs would be at the forefront of the process, "running interference" for domestic NGOs that were politically more vulnerable, I found the opposite to be true in the cases I examined. That is, while I did confirm that international organizations provided money and venues for networking and sharing information, and that they could potentially embarrass Beijing, I found them to be at most indirectly involved (and in only one of the three cases I documented, that of the Nujiang).

Indeed, two of the IGOs and INGOs that I analyzed in the book—the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Nature Conservancy, respectively—took a much more cautious approach toward interacting with the Chinese government. UNESCO pointedly did not want to get involved in the Dujiangyan controversy, even despite Dujiangyan's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The organization's fear was almost palpable when I interviewed representatives in Beijing. Moreover, my sources among the activists were genuinely annoyed that they had been so unceremoniously "deputized" by UNESCO to try to save Dujiangyan, as UNESCO preferred to avoid getting involved. The Nature Conservancy was far less timid but was acutely aware of its limitations as an advocacy group. The Nature Conservancy calculated that it needed to cooperate with Yunnan and Beijing in order to meet the organization's primary aims, even if this meant sacrificing other goals dear to its mission, all the while being mercilessly criticized by local activists as being a "patsy" of the state.

In terms of the international implications of *China's Water Warriors*, Lampton in his review provides another important articulation of what is suggested in the book that is worth repeating:

China gradually is heading in the direction of a more responsive polity, a more constrained leadership; one cannot, however, expect that more pluralization will always translate into more international cooperation of Chinese behavior more aligned with

U.S. interests. If this is true, maybe the unspoken bottom line is that Americans need to spend somewhat less time worrying about China's political direction and somewhat more time asking what change in China requires in terms of change in the United States.

In a forthcoming piece, I bring in precisely this international dimension, although within the policy area of international trade and between China and the European Union.<sup>4</sup> More germane here is the last line of the above quote by Lampton, which presages the overarching theme of Brettell's analysis, to which I devote the remainder of this essay.

### *Critiquing China*

The essay by Brettell, while thought-provoking, lacks a clear, consistent line of argument. Indeed, in attempting to disentangle the logic at the root of her argument, I found only one consistent point: where Peter Ford makes the astute observation that “‘pluralization’ clearly does not mean freedom,” Brettell seems unable to move beyond a normative preoccupation that pluralization should mean freedom.

Some of Brettell's points are well-taken. For example, she asserts that what I “fail...to consider is that the advocates...are not completely opposed to dams and would likely accept smaller dams, if social justice and environmental issues were given due consideration.” Putting aside what exactly “due consideration” really means in the Chinese context, she is certainly correct in asserting that being anti-big dam is not the same as being anti-small dam. But Brettell assumes away the exponentially higher transaction costs as well as the overall environmental impact of such decentralized decisionmaking and local water project implementation. On the first point, given the myriad interests involved along both horizontal (*kuai*) and vertical (*tiao*) lines of authority, center-local relations, and fragmentation within discrete administrative levels of government, does Brettell really believe that Beijing has the ability and resources available to manage such a hornet's nest? If not—and this derives from the second point—given Beijing's inability (or lack of desire) to micromanage these local projects and the resulting management vacuum, how would this scenario differ from the exceedingly environmentally unfriendly local water projects that contributed to the destructiveness of the Great Leap Forward?

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Mertha, “Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0: Political Pluralization in the Policy Process,” *China Quarterly* (forthcoming).

Brettell also argues that I “disregard...China’s advances in energy efficiency and clean coal technologies as well as the role of renewable and nuclear sources of energy.” Without actually debating whether clean coal technology is possible, Brettell is right about cleaner coal technology. A recent *New York Times* piece is encouraging in this regard.<sup>5</sup> Even if we take that story as being perfectly accurate, however—that is, that Chinese government sources are actually following through on their claims of building cleaner coal facilities—at least 30% of new coal-burning energy facilities going on line are not using this new technology (and even the new ones only reduce carbon emissions by one-third compared to the dirtiest plants, which is an improvement, though not a solution). Brettell’s evocation of nuclear power is particularly interesting. Of course China is exploring “the nuclear option,” but the first new generation nuclear power plants are unlikely to go on line in less than 30 years from the time Beijing signs off on them, assuming all goes well. Three decades is a considerable period of time, yet this temporal dimension is not mentioned in Brettell’s analysis.

More often, however, her essay becomes curiously self-contradictory. For example, Brettell makes the *a priori* argument that sub-provincial officials “should not be lumped together in the same categories as NGOs and activists.” But then she criticizes the analysis because I fail to “ascribe the policy entrepreneur role to local government and party officials and to representatives from the Dujiangyan UNESCO World Heritage Office instead of to the two journalists/activists, Zhang Kejia and Wang Yongchen.”<sup>6</sup>

Brettell cites Kristen McDonald—one of the most qualified scholars today on the Nu River—who “points out...the role of local officials is crucial to the outcome of dam politics and they may be the real ‘water warriors.’” Although Brettell cites this as an alternative explanation to mine, McDonald and I are making exactly the same argument.

On a point of proper social scientific inquiry, Brettell argues that I cannot possibly generalize from the three cases examined in my book to argue that political liberalization is occurring in China. Methodologically speaking, however, I can: my suggestion that liberalization may extend beyond hydropower is based upon the notion that what I observed took place in an

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Bradsher, “China Outpaces U.S. in Cleaner Coal-Fired Plants,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> This is inaccurate as well; refer to the discussion on pp. 8–9 and pp. 105–6 in *China’s Water Warriors*.

unlikely policy area (energy), implying that it possibly could occur (rather than is occurring) in other policy areas.<sup>7</sup>

### *State Capacity*

But what is most problematic is Brettell's binary view of political liberalization. To paraphrase her point, if people are still being arrested and imprisoned arbitrarily, China, by definition, is not liberalizing. In failing to offer a realistic baseline for comparison, she makes it impossible to sensibly measure progress on the front of political liberalization. From her comments, one could easily extrapolate that once "detention, arrest, harassment, job termination, eviction, and a myriad of other threats from officials" stop, then and only then can we begin to talk about political liberalization in China. Such a simplistic view of China is not a terribly useful one from which to craft policy because it ignores the question of state capacity, a critical subtext in *China's Water Warriors*.

Rather than singling Brettell out, however, I wish to underscore how pervasive her argumentation, which I view as faulty, is among so many policymakers in Washington. One recurring theme in this argument is precisely the inability or unwillingness to bring in state capacity as a legitimate area of discussion regarding China's domestic and international behavior.

On June 8, 2006, I testified before the U.S.-China Economics and Security Commission on the subject of intellectual property. I raised the following point: we often think that because China can regulate the most intimate behavior of 1.3 billion people for a generation via the one-child policy, something as prosaic as copyright enforcement should be a piece of cake. But this logic gets the calculation exactly wrong because it ignores the notion of state capacity. That is, China can only redistribute the massive amount of resources necessary to enforce such an extended campaign in two, maybe three, policy areas at any given time. Though Beijing may well see copyright piracy as a problem, it is nowhere near as immediately challenging to the leaders in Zhongnanhai as is population policy or social stability. Only if an issue moves to second or third

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<sup>7</sup> On existence and impossibility claims, see Gary King, Robert O Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Douglas Dion, "Evidence and Inference and the Comparative Case Study," *Comparative Politics* 30, no. 2 (1998): 127-45; Bear F. Braumoeller, and Gary Goertz, "The Methodology of Necessary Conditions," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 4 (2000): 844-58; Robert Pahre, "Formal Theory and Case Studies in European Union Studies," *European Union Politics* 6, no. 1 (2005): 113-46; and Andrew Mertha and Robert Pahre, "Patently Misleading: Partial Implementation and Bargaining Leverage in Sino-American Negotiations on Intellectual Property Rights," *International Organization* 59, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 695-730. On leveraging case studies, see Arend Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method," *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 3 (September 1971): 682-93.

priority can we expect the same degree of enforcement we see in the one-child campaign. In the meantime, like most policy matters, copyright management is handled by the bureaucracies and local governments; and that is where the germ of any real solution is most likely to be found.<sup>8</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In *China's Water Warriors* I have attempted to document what to me was a surprising but nonetheless empirically demonstrable phenomenon of political pluralization in the policy area of hydropower. Of course, there are a number of interpretations that we can attach to this conclusion. One of the more hopeful ones—and one that I subscribe to, albeit cautiously—is that Beijing has recognized that there is no shame in the delegation of responsibilities (nor is there much risk, given the continued strength of the CCP), not simply to local governments but also to some organizations hitherto considered outside or peripheral to the governing apparatus. This interpretation places such actions on the part of Beijing squarely in the context of state capacity: perhaps what we are seeing is Beijing's acknowledgement that it cannot micromanage an exponentially complex matrix of social, economic, and even political change, and that the center might be able to better govern—and perhaps even enhance its own power (as the CCP does via township and village elections)—by delegating such authority through lowering some of the barriers to entry into the political process. ♦

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<sup>8</sup> In response, one commission member remarked that he had never considered state capacity with regard to China (“...it's the first time I've really heard the challenge of unwillingness versus inability as it relates to China”). The complete exchange can be found in a PDF document of the transcript on the author's website ≈ <http://falcon.arts.cornell.edu/am847/pdf/Oral%20Comments.pdf>. The full citation is U.S.-China Economics and Security Commission, “Panel IX: IP Law and Bilateral Negotiations,” *Hearing on China's Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights and the Dangers of the Movement of Counterfeited and Pirated Goods into the United States*, June 7–8, 2006 ≈ [http://www.uscc.gov/hearings/2006hearings/hr06\\_06\\_08\\_09.php](http://www.uscc.gov/hearings/2006hearings/hr06_06_08_09.php).