

The Three Gorges Project: Technological Discourse and the Resolution of Competing Interests

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Abstract

The 70-year debate over whether or not to build the world's largest water conservancy project in the Three Gorges region of the Changjiang reveals the complexity of current Chinese conflict resolution. We argue that the approval of the Three Gorges Project implicates a consensual reality that has been constructed from a privileging of a new authority: Western science. This article examines how the premises of development and efficiency allowed the "priestly voice" of science to overcome the mythical "bardic voice" of Chinese tradition. The intercultural nature of this conflict "resolution" is explored.

The Changjiang is the longest river in China. It is the third longest in the world. Over the past 2,000 years, the Changjiang has flooded 200 times. With each severe flood, the river claims tremendous numbers of lives and hectares of valuable farmland. The river has posed a daunting challenge to China's development.

To tame the Changjiang has long been a dream of the state. As early as 1919, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, leader of China's bourgeois revolution, proposed that a dam be built across the Changjiang to control flooding. The Chinese Communist Party also took a keen interest in the project. Mao Zedong, leader of the Cultural Revolution, is reported to have endorsed the project (Deng, 1995). In the 1970s and '80s, Deng Xiaoping obtained agreements with the U. S., Japan, and the European countries to explore financial and technological support for a water project on the Changjiang.

To harness such a powerful natural resource would mean safety for a growing population in the middle portion of the Changjiang, economic stability for a country that periodically loses to floods the harvest of its richest agricultural region, and economic growth from increased inland shipping and hydropower production. To successfully tame the Changjiang would also be a source of national pride. Called "The Three Gorges Project" (or the Project) - named for the Qutang, Wu, and Xiling gorges, whose areas would be most affected by the dam - China began a 70-year consideration on whether or not to embark on a world class high-tech adventure.

Such a project, however, was not without opposition. Just as the advantages of the Project were integral to China's future, the possible disadvantages had roots deep in China's past. One feasibility study found that "over 400 underground relic sites will be submerged, a sizable number of them ruins from ancient cultures indispensable to the study of the origin and development of Chinese civilization" (Li, 1994, p. 47). Additionally, the migratory route of the prized Chinese sturgeon, already disrupted by an earlier dam on the Changjiang in the early 1980s, certainly would be damaged, perhaps irreparably (Xiang, 1995). Opponents of the project also pointed to the high cost of the Project (about 40 billion yuan, or 10 billion U. S. dollars), the distant completion date (2009), and the forced relocation of populations (1.1 million) currently living in the Three Gorges valley.

For decades, opponents of the Project prevailed. Then, in the late 1987, the Chinese government assembled in Beijing a multinational team of scientist and water conservancy experts. These experts, which numbered in the hundreds, had a single task: to determine the technological and economic feasibility of the Three Gorges Project. The consensus of the experts was that such a Project was feasible (Only nine out of 412 Chinese experts expressed reservations). With this scientific judgment, the Project was approved in 1992 by the Seventh National People's Congress (NPC). First ground on the Three Gorges Project was broken in December, 1994.

The decision of the NPC closed a long-running controversy and turned the water project into a social reality. The controversy over the Three Gorges Project offers an opportunity to examine how competing discourses were resolved by the Chinese establishment to gain popular commitment. How did Chinese officials gain approval for the project that had been the target of popular skepticism and opposition? How was consensus for the Project created? Deetz (1985) cautioned us that the accomplishment of consensus cannot assume that competing interests have adequately been heard. Therefore, a critical examination of any consensus is warranted.

We argue that the official endorsement of the Project implicates a new consensual reality that has been constructed largely from a privileging of a new authority: science. In this paper, we consider how science, as a "discursive formation" (Foucault, 1972) reconstituted power relations in the Project debate. In section one, we explain the discursive significance in the shift from Mao's focus on class struggle to Deng's focus on economic development. Section two examines the implications of the place of science, as a new knowledge discourse, for the Three Gorges Project debate. Section three explores the cultural and intercultural consequences of the new knowledge discourse for future conflict resolution. The accounts of the debate examined in this study are drawn from two official sources, published in English. The sources are editions of *China Construction* and *China Today*, published from 1992 to 1995.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF CHINESE POLITICAL REALITY

Michel Foucault (1973), in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, was not concerned with how discourse made options precise, he was concerned with the "dispersion of the points of choice" (p. 36). In other words, the sense of an orientation is imbedded in the very process of choice-making and this orientation was present in every life-domain in which an individual was compelled to make a choice. Foucault's insight in this work was to draw attention to the shaping of selection; in any deliberation, an individual encounters "prior to any option, to any thematic preference, a field of strategic possibilities" (p. 37). Foucault saw the "field" as emanating from

an assemblage of related statements or propositions and these combined statements composed a structure of knowing, or *discursive formation*. According to McNay (1992), discursive formations are associated with “historically specific regimes of power” and their propositions have a “normalizing and regulatory function” (p. 25). We can understand recent Chinese political history as a contention between two discursive formations.

The Maoist Regime.

When the Communist Party led by Mao Zedong took power in 1949, it modeled the new country after the Soviet Union: a socialist political and economic system. In this regime, the socialist model was created to combat the capitalist model. The ideal was the cooperative ownership of the means of production and distribution of commercial goods.

To establish a socialist formation, Mao’s political rhetoric labeled capitalist competition as a “people-eat-people” system. This induced people to believe that private ownership was the very source of inequality among members of society. Eventually, not only were strenuous efforts made to strive for a state-planned economy, but also campaigns were conducted to prevent any deviation toward capitalist “evils.” The battle against anything capitalist became the guiding political practice for almost 40 years. People’s political and social consciousness, especially those in urban centers, was all caught up in “taking class struggle as the key line” (Zhang, 1994, p. 11). Consequently, the country prioritized ideological correctness at the cost of social and economic development. Mao’s death in 1978 let loose rigid political control. For the first time, television programs such as “looking to the West” gave millions of Chinese a chance to glimpse the strange, yet fascinating world of open market society, a society that they had been taught to despise.

The Deng Regime.

In the late 1970s and early ’80, pressures of economic change generally were felt by the central government, yet the old formation stood in the way. Deng Xiaoping and his reform advocates faced an immense rhetorical challenge. Essentially, they had to resolve the tension between socialism and capitalism. First, they devaluated Mao’s policy that took class struggle as the key line. Instead, Deng proposed a new policy that had its center economic construction. The key to this construction was technology. Deng’s emphasis was clear, “China must first develop science and technology since progress in science and technology can promote economic development” (Rao, 1991, p. 20). Deng’s proposal has been the guide that has given rise to a new formation, one that provides people with a radically different “field of options” with which they can view the world and act in the world.

Under the new episteme, Deng proposed an economic structure in which coexist “a mix of State-owned, collective, private and foreign-owned businesses” (Zhang, 1994, p. 11). Yet the notion of private ownership could not help but remind the people of the “evils” of capitalism. In advocacy of foreign-founded business brought to memory a history in which Chinese were exploited on their own land by foreign economic interests. To counter this response, Deng was forced to review socialist economic theories. Deng had to re-direct people’s perception of the two economic systems. He began with the assertion that China needed “[to] absorb and make use of mankind’s achievements, including capitalist countries” (Zhang, 1994, p. 14). Deng then

argued that “a planned economy is not equivalent to socialism because capitalism also has its plans; a market economy is not equivalent to capitalism because socialism also has its market. Plans and markets are both economic means” (Zhang, 1994, p. 12). By emphasizing the common goals of opportunism, efficiency, and prosperity shared by socialism and capitalism, Deng’s arguments have taken out of the dark shadows of capitalist economic development and the free market.

In the face of Deng’s reformist rhetoric, the Three Gorges Project is positioned as an inevitable, if not urgent selection. First, the Project makes use of “mankind’s (that is, the West’s) technological achievements and second, the Project facilitates the market reforms desired by the central government. The next section examines how this new discursive formation changed the debate over the Three Gorges Project.

CONFLICTING INTERESTS AND TECHNOLOGICAL DISCOURSE IN THE THREE GORGES PROJECT DEBATE

In analyzing any policy or legal dispute, we seek to identify the relevant parties. But the establishment of standing, the process of having one’s complaint heard, and how one “tells their side,” are not straightforward matters. According to Foucault (1972), each discursive formation will create and naturalize its own “enunciative rules” (p. 50-55) for interaction. It is through rules that guide one’s sense of self and one’s knowledge about how to act in the world that a discursive formation, or regime, reveals and performs its power. These rules establish, for example, who is qualified to speak (by virtue of having a particular status or of having the association of a particular institution), who can evacuate the qualifications of speakers, and in what situations is speaking appropriate. One way to understand how the controversy over the Three Gorges Project was resolved is to examine the enunciative rules at play.

Our first clue is found in the observation that whereas dynastic regimes, and the more recent Maoist regime were sustained by the symbols of common myth and ritual, Deng’s regime was sustained by the pronouncement of specialists and experts from a variety of disciplines, including science. With each formation, the grounds for legitimation changed. The consequence of this is that the enunciative rules shifted dramatically over the course of the debate. We borrow from Lessl’s (1989) description of *bardic* and *priestly* discourse to characterize the opposing voices in the controversy.

Opposition to the Project and the Bardic Voice.

Bardic discourse “confines itself to the world of common sense experience already integral to its audience’s identity” (Lessl, 1989, p. 184). The bardic voice recirculates the traditional knowledge of a society and provides a commentary by which new events, through the lens of that traditional knowledge, can be understood. In this sense, the bardic voice tells its audience what it already knows and the bardic speaker could be one of the audience. Lessl (1989) states: “When bards talk, it is our own voice that we hear, the faint murmuring of a collective consciousness amplified in poetic utterances and often recognizable as myth” (p. 184).

We believe that Mao Zedong possessed such a bardic voice. His attacks on capitalism were directed at more than just an economic system. They were directed toward an order of values that many Chinese ascribed to the West - an order that privileged expedience, materialism,

and individualism. Before Deng, opponents could credibly express skepticism about both whether the dam could be built and whether the country actually needed what the dam could provide. In this formation, the ennuciative rules allowed arguments to be drawn from history, folklore, and the arts. Without this bardic voice, however, the opponents to the Project were forced to argue on conditions set by the scientific priesthood.

For example, Luo Xibei, vice-president of the board of the China International Consulting Corporation, while not opposing the Project per se, proposed a modification. Instead of building the planned 175-meter-high dam, he advocated building a 160-meter-high dam. According to Luo, the lowering of the dam would reduce the number of people to be relocated from 1.1 million to 670 thousand. A consequence of this would be a cut in the annual electricity output from 84 billion kwh to 73 billion kwh (“NPC deputies and CPPCC members on the Three Gorges Project,” p. 13). Luo’s proposal had as a priority the preservation of local communities. The proposal was rejected at the NPC. Luo’s proposal reveals division of opinion on the project and suggests the complexity of issues surrounding the Project. Yet the official discourse we examined, which has shaped our presentation of the debate in this essay, divides positions as being either for or against the project.

The bardic voice speaks to the general sense of social experience. It speaks on issues broadly, and sometimes cryptically to the outsider not familiar with references deep in a community’s collective memory. This voice could not accommodate a voice that speaks with precision and exactness. Hence, the arguments of Chinese environmentalists seem weak. Although environmentalists are certain that the Project will have an impact on the natural ecology, and that some wildlife may be made extinct, they cannot pinpoint the extent or the cost of the impact. Moreover, the environmental and cultural preservationists cannot refute the proponent’s accusations that they have exaggerated the negative effects on the environment and people. Neither can they convincingly challenge those who believe that some of the disadvantages are “not serious” (The Three Gorges Project,” p. 6). Value claims would be accorded a status outside of scientific findings and so these claims are dismissable. The next section interprets the ennuciative prescriptions for those who advocated the Project.

Support for the Project and the Priestly Voice.

The priestly voice speaks for an elite subculture. According to Lessl (1989), “the priestly voice distinguishes itself from its bardic counterparts by insisting that its origins reside outside of ordinary human experience . . .” (p. 184). The role of priestly discourse is to teach to the majority, as best it can, the principles and knowledge obtained by the few. If we accept Overington’s (1977) view of the production of scientific knowledge as “a way of speaking about specific experience before a limited and specially trained audience that is authorized to establish that discourse as knowledge” (p. 144), then we can recognize the priestly voice of such an audience. In this formation, the ennuciative rules allowed arguments to be formulated by state officials on the basis of information deemed relevant by its status as a scientific report or study, conducted by experts residing at universities and institutes.

The goal of development at once aligned the interests of the Chinese central government with the interests of Western scientific rationality. Terms used to provide a texture to China’s future such as “development,” “achievement,” and “efficiency” anticipate the instrumental,

technical language. Carey (1989) called attention to the significance of technical language. He states that the use of technical language “is not merely to pick up a tool or to exercise a skill. It is to constitute a world, to bring a world into existence, and to simultaneously constitute a self” (1989, p. 23). Ironically, the Project that was intended to control floods, itself has created a flood of new meanings.

While scientific study of the Project occurred throughout the lifetime of the debate, never before had the central government participated in or relied upon scientific conclusions. Dou Guoren, a NPC deputy, states: “During the study phase of the Project, experts with different opinions were divided to voice their views in order to ensure scientific and democratic decision-making . . .” (“NPC deputies and CPPCC members on the Three Gorges Project,” p. 12). As befits the dialogue of an elite priesthood, participation is restricted. To have an influence in the considerations, one must be an invited expert. Interestingly, this deputy elevates deliberation to “scientific decision-making” while the democratic aspect is secondary.

Scientific opinions, though most of it telling the Chinese people what they already knew, gained a new authority. Li Boning, a state expert on irrigation, claimed that “if a major flood occurred, death estimates in the tens of thousands or even over a million would not be unrealistic for Hunan and Hubei province alone. The consequence would be dreadful” (“The Three Gorges Project,” p. 4). This vision, arrived at through scientific study and spoken by an expert, rhetorically creates a sense of urgency and inevitability that overshadows the environmental and cultural concerns, making them less important and less reasonable.

Proponents also created a sense of urgency by invoking the scientific-instrumental value of efficiency. For example, Shen Kechang, an NPC deputy, noted that, “any delay in the Project will make the resettlement of the inhabitants even more difficult A one-year delay will cost an additional 540 million yuan in resettlement costs. We have met with success in our experimental resettlements” (“NPC deputies and CPPCC members on the Three Gorges Project,” p. 12). Perhaps inadvertently, Deputy Shen reinforced the capitalist belief that deliberation has a cost.

Further, local opposition to relocation is minimized because resettlement has been sanctioned by the rigors of experiment. In this discourse, attention is given to relocated residents in terms of material compensations such as new housing, pensions for lost jobs, and new schools. Nothing is said of the social identities of communities that cannot be maintained. No price is put on the distinctive values systems that would be wiped out as communities are disbanded. We suspect that difficulties will arise as established communities encounter these displaced newcomers, yet we discovered no science directed toward this possibility.

There are still others who are so overwhelmed by the estimated economic profits that they have learned to perceive the potential side-effects as a minor price to pay for the monumental Project. Instead of acknowledging the side-effects and taking well-thought measures to address them, the advocates touch on these real issues lightly simply by stressing that the gains outweigh the losses. By prioritizing the gains, the proponents not only confirm their faith in scientific-technological authority, the maneuver public perception to minimize the hardships of those whose lives will be forced to change as a result of the Project.

Finally, some proponents do acknowledge negative side-effects. However, “the consensus holds that all the problems can be solved, just as scientific measures are taken” (Deng, 1992, p.

28). If silt builds up too fast, science will change the velocity of the river flow. If relics are submerged and cannot be moved, science can build an underwater museum. A discursive formation is secure when it naturally turns to itself for answer to questions and solutions to problems. Such is the case with scientific rationality at the Three Gorges Project.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINESE CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The resolution of the Three Gorges Project controversy occurred as one discourse successfully relocated the authority bases of another. Yet how did this appear as a unifying resolution that could be called popular consensus? One answer lies in the manner in which the Project defenders were able to utilize elements of the bardic tradition. For example, Wei Tingchen, a member of the Project control committee, in his response to critics of the Project, was reported to have said, "The natural resources of the [Changjiang] need careful protection . . . and the river is not simply a large sewer given to men and women as a gift from Mother Nature" (Xiang, 1995, p. 47). His answer establishes the expectation of human intervention and reproduces the scientific value of control: humans control nature to protect it. The invocation of the "mother" nature in his answer also plays upon a firmly held Chinese belief: that humans should co-exist in harmony with nature. Whereas in the bardic discourse, harmony would mean living with nature, in the priestly discourse, harmony is to be insured through technological initiatives. In the bardic discourse, nature is giving and protective, in the priestly discourse, nature is an unpredictable force that must be rendered predictable. This strategic reversal of the mythic-bardic regime allowed supporters of the Project to claim adherence to traditional Chinese values even they were being discarded for Western values. Thus, a surface examination of the resolution would show a consensus on the values and practices of the Project.

What are the implications of this episode? We mention three. First, as Pilotta and Widman (1986) have argued, technical transfer is knowledge and value transfer. As China opens itself to the techniques of Western nations, the cultural preferences of these nations will be reproduced in China. A multinational collection of scientists insures to some extent a multinational program. Western values are now being installed on the banks of the Changjiang.

Second, given this, China cannot continue to believe that it can unproblematically adopt and accommodate the practices (particularly scientific) of other societies. China cannot assume to possess the resources to adequately understand and address problems related to the Project that have origins in other societies. The subsequent conflicts surrounding the Project should be approached as issues and instances of intercultural communication.

Finally, what counts as resolution and consensus from a Chinese perspective must be continually interrogated. Chinese scholars and critics (and here we implicate our own elite) must continue to develop models and criteria for participation in social-policy deliberations. How are power relations to be understood? What are the cultural roles of discourse in social-policy deliberations? What mechanisms exist for the reconciliation between Chinese cultural performance and the culturally divergent prescriptions embedded in new technologies? Who is allowed to develop them? Who controls their application? These are simply the starting points for further inquiry.

CONCLUSION

The debate on the Three Gorges Project entails a serious conflict of interests. The present political rhetoric in China thrives on instrumental-technical values. Although the debate is ended and the Project is entering its second phase, we learn from it that the consensus reached advanced a particular system of thinking and valuing and suppressed another.

But it would be naïve of us to believe that alternative thought has been rendered extinct. Traditional Chinese culture continues to exert power on the communicative preferences of the people. Local discourses are still marked with the epideictic and the collaborative. If the state is to be responsible, it should balance the demands for economic development with a genuine attention to the participation of multiple interests.

China is at a historical moment of change politically, socially, and economically. We hope that our examination of the case of the Three Gorges Project has shed a provocative light on the nature of consensus in China, and the future of Chinese resolutions of conflict.

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