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Yan Gao’s *Yangzi Waters: Transforming the Water Regime of the Jianghan Plain in Late Imperial China* is an important work of early modern water history that combines excellent research, a novel topic, an original theoretical framework, and a striking narrative. Two elements make it unique among works on water history. First, it is about agriculture and other modes of subsistence in a wetland region, a poorly drained locale where residents learned to practice “amphibious living” (p. 36) on a “hydraulic periphery” (p. 1). Landscapes like these rarely feature in water history literature. Gao vividly describes how water management regimes and struggles for livelihood were adapted to seasonal variations in the division between wet, marshy, and dry terrain; and between cultivatable and uncultivatable land. On the Jianghan Plain, a region at the confluence of the Han and Yangzi Rivers in central Hubei, the varying annual intensity of the East Asian Monsoon and its cycles of wet and dry conditions could transform vulnerable people from farmers into raft-dwelling foragers, or vice versa, as could small adjustments to levees, canals, and the policies and practices by which they were maintained. Gao does a terrific job explaining how fluid this environment was—both literally and metaphorically—and how that characteristic shaped the history of the region’s water regime.

*Yangzi Waters* is, moreover, among the best water history books I have ever read when it comes to adjudicating and integrating the relationship between those aspects of water infrastructure development and management that were motivated by large-scale state power, and those that were dictated by local self-governance. At the beginning of her introduction, Gao juxtaposes two iconic water narratives against one another. She notes that there may be ample room to reconcile Clifford Geertz’s work on community management of Balinese water temples and Karl Wittfogel’s despotic hydraulic state, each one accounting for some aspect of a given water story (p. 3). In addition, she offers Peter Perdue’s model of diverse possible modes of state control in water manage-
ment arrayed along continua from small to large and from state-controlled to autonomous.

The point is that modes of political economy in water management may vary from place to place, and they may shift over time. Gao argues persuasively that in the Jianghan Plain over the course of the Qing regime (1644-1911), there was a transition away from preponderant state control of water at the beginning of the era and toward more local control of water (p. 3). Particularly for readers who are not experts in Chinese history, the book offers a refreshing, even unsettling, counterpoint to the stereotype that early modern environmental history is always a narrative about the increasing power of the state over people and nature.

The first chapter of *Yangzi Water* focuses on the environmental setting of the Jianghan Plain, especially in the context of wet rice agriculture, which requires precise amounts of water to be drained in and out of fields at very specific times of year. Gao introduces the central nonhuman agents of her story: polders (yuàn), embanked fields claimed from marshland, enclosed by levees, with water levels controlled by sluice gates. “Organic machines” in Richard White’s sense, as Gao points out, polders were difficult to maintain in working order and intractable to many forms of management. Thus, on the Jianghan Plain, she argues, requirements for building and managing polders and for regulating access to them animated a social structure built around cooperation. With state incentives, land enclosed in polders on the Jianghan Plain expanded rapidly from the mid-1600s to the mid-1700s. Private polder construction continued through the early decades of the 1800s before the water system deteriorated under pressures from erosion and rebellion in the 1800s.

*Yangzi Waters* is an exceptional book when it comes to understanding “community dynamism” (p. 234) in Jianghan Plain water management. However, Gao does not explore the dynamics of power or exploitation within that community. Though she refers to poverty and to the denigration of poor, landless, and mobile denizens of the plain, she does not describe how polder construction and management exploited such households for backbreaking and dangerous work, how their access to land and livelihood may have been constrained, or how property owners, wealthy people, politically connected gentry, and others set the terms of polder construction and access to water and farmland, as they surely must have done. This is an important part of the story, especially given the efflorescence of mass uprisings in the region starting in the nineteenth century.

The rest of the book is chronological, and it emphasizes two major themes in addition to polder management. One area of focus is the changing activism of the Qing state. The Jianghan Plain was peripheral to centers of imperial wealth and power even as it held a strategic position for connecting north and south China in its western regions. The other topic is demographic history. Almost in passing, Gao points out (p. 117) that the Jianghan Plain population increased by ten times from the early seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century: a full order of magnitude! Although her narrative does not ignore population growth, I wish that she had emphasized it more strongly. By the end of the eighteenth century, population pressure pushed deforestation and swidden maize farming into the mountains overlooking the polders, which in turn caused erosion that, along with intentional wetland drainage, transformed the topography of the plain. On the Jianghan Plain, as elsewhere in late Qing China, desperate and landless households mounted massive rebellions. In keeping with many narratives of Qing history, the first half of the book traces a story of growth and flourishing, and the second describes a descent into crisis. Population history is essential to that story.

The story begins with Qing founding following the seventeenth-century climate crisis, which
(along with civil war and rebellion) had depopulated the Jianghan Plain. The Qing regime secured the plain and promoted wetland drainage and polder construction. The court also attempted to maintain warhorse pasturage there in support of a large garrison situated amidst the wetlands, floodplains, lakes, and riverbeds of Jianghan. The venture failed when Qing officers discovered that horses could not survive on the saline grass that grew in the region, and as rising populations put pressure on potential farmland. Rebellion, dispute over scarce land, and environmental crisis, punctuated with episodes of local gentry activism, followed in the wake of peak polder expansion in the early nineteenth century.

In short, this excellent book has much to recommend to water historians, who should be inspired by its success in troubling river history narratives that draw simple boundaries between wet and dry terrain and between the state and local residents.

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