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Volume 13 Spring 2011

SPRING 2011

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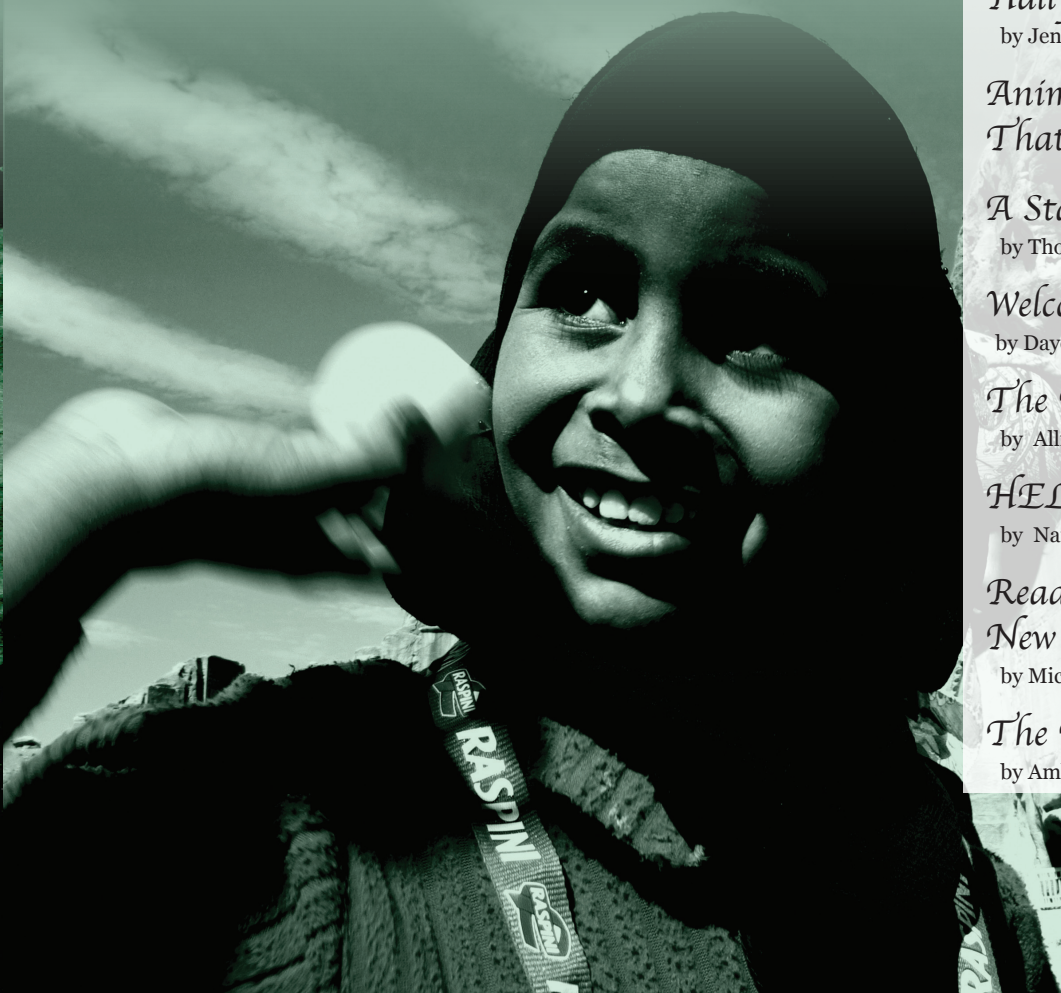




photo by David Wong

Shanghai Oil Spill: The Huangpu River of Democracy

■ by Rachel Leng

Flowing gracefully through the heart of metropolitan Shanghai, the Huangpu (or Yellow Bank River) is a majestic 97 kilometer long river that bisects the city into the east and west, Pudong and Puxi, banks. The versatile Huangpu River is the city's longest and one of the earliest in China to be used by men, reaching an average width of 400 meters and a depth of 9 meters.¹ Known as the "Mother River," the Huangpu has long been considered the symbol and embodiment of Shanghai, with majestic significance equal to the Thames of London, the Nile of Cairo, and the Seine of Paris. It supplies water to the thirteen million people in the metropolis and is also important for navigation, fishery, tourism and receiving wastewater.² The river is also inextricably intertwined with the social and economic life of Shanghai, having nurtured its prosperity and served as a silent eyewitness to the city's history and development.

If you were to visit Shanghai now, the most common way to explore the Huangpu River is by boat. Tourists can embark on a three and a half hour journey across 60 kilometers of the river, meandering eastward along the golden waterway to downtown Shanghai. Sailing down, you will find yourself immersed in the renowned sights of the Yangpu Bridge shaped like a sleeping dragon, the Nanpu Bridge reminiscent of a rainbow arch, the Bund, and the Oriental Pearl TV Tower. When on such a cruise, it is easy to see stark differences in architecture between the east and west banks: the 21st century cityscape of urban skyscrapers of different foreign architectural designs on the west bank presents an exotic contrast to the colonial constructions and modern high rises on the east bank. An experience of the Huangpu riverfront offers interesting perspectives on both the old and new Shanghai, giving visitors the brief feeling of passing through a corridor of the city's complex history. The dramatic contrast on both sides of the riverbank appears almost surreal, as if a designer had simply juxtaposed scenes from two different periods of time. Under

the rays of the sun, the water glimmers a beautiful color of yellow jade – from which the river derived its name – and beckons to the touch, almost as if it had captured the essence of sunlight itself. At night, the river is awash with color as lights from buildings on the riverbank cast lively reflections on the water surface. Both banks are constantly bustling with people, and the river itself is always crowded with cargo and cruise ships. Occasionally, you can even see fish swimming just underneath the surface and hear them plopping out of the water.

While Shanghai's skyscrapers and modern lifestyle are often seen as quintessential to China's recent economic development and industrialization, the city still faces conflict and contradictions. The "Shanghai Fever" of the last decade has almost erased every trace of the city's agricultural past as a small fishing village. The Chinese government's attempt to recapture Shanghai's glorious past as the "Paris of the Orient" in the 1920's and 1940's materialized in the form of a frenzied project of "cosmopolitanism" in the 1990s. Pudong, the east bank of the Huangpu River, was established as a Special Economic Zone in 1993 and is now one of the fastest growing hot spots of urbanization and global enterprise in the world.³

Living in Shanghai, I witnessed how the "Pearl of the East" TV tower – bearing resemblance to the Eiffel Tower of Paris – and numerous skyscrapers were erected in a few years. Major bridges and tunnels were also built, boosting the city's economy and linking the old and new Shanghai. These imposing feats of construction serve as testimony to the unbelievable ability of the Chinese to change a city landscape. Rice paddies seemingly turned into asphalt roads, commercial buildings, and residential compounds almost overnight. The once-rural and barren Pudong was transformed into one of the most impressive futuristic landscapes within less than a decade.

A cruise on the Huangpu River will surround you with dazzling sights of urban innovation. However, the river truly does

serve as a silent witness privy to the full effects of Shanghai's rapid and superficially magical transformation. If you sail further down the river, you will be stepping into another world: one that lays bare the reality of industrialization, stripped of all the bright lights and shiny buildings. The scenery is much less picturesque, and the riverbanks do not boast impressive, awe-inspiring feats of architecture. Instead, they are clustered with rows and rows of factories – more than a hundred steel and cotton factories use the Huangpu River as a source of waterpower and a site for waste disposal. The sky in these areas is a perpetual blanket of gray, thickened with the smog and smoke constantly belched from uncountable factory smokestacks. The river water here no longer glistens and shines with liquid sunshine; it is instead clouded in a murky brown, even black with sewage, covered with greasy slicks of oil. There is no sign of life: no fish in the water and no individuals to be found anywhere near the river, only the occasional cargo ship. The river banks are inundated with rubbish and swamped with the fetid stench of industrial waste mixed with decay.

The Huangpu River has always held an endearing symbolism for the people of China and the citizens of Shanghai – it is the main artery of the city's heart, nurturing them by pumping the necessary resources to make Shanghai's economy so successful. Shanghai is dependent on the Huangpu River for water (for agricultural, industrial, and human consumption uses), fishing, transportation, and tourism, including many other aspects of modern life. Without the river, Shanghai would not be anywhere close to being the world class city that it is today. Chinese culture also emanates with reverence for the river, with hundreds of poems written in admiration of its magnificence and importance to the people's way of life.

Unfortunately, allowing a city to grow while preserving its cultural history and natural beauty is a particular challenge in Shanghai, especially since the country is witnessing unprecedented rates of economic growth. The government is single-mindedly driven to achieve sustained double digit economic growth and is thus largely unresponsive in taking initiative to enact environmental laws. Despite national and international recommendations to curb pollution and prevent permanent destruction of the environment, the government still refuses to enact any laws with proper teeth to protect the environment in fear of obstructing industrial progress and economic profits. In fact, the government enforces a heavy hand against any protestors accusing factories of polluting local water sources, and it is common practice for factories to pay "compensation" to pollute.⁴

At present, studies have indicated that the Huangpu River's pollution problem

alone will cost more than \$13 billion to alleviate.⁵ This exorbitant sum begs a river of questions: When is the indiscriminate polluting of the environment, especially of the rivers that made China what it is today, going to stop? How much is it going to cost to clean up China's ruthless exploitation of natural resources? Who will speak out to raise awareness and promote advocacy in protection of the environment? If, and when, a Chinese environmental movement does emerge, what would it look like? And perhaps most importantly, what would an environmental movement mean to the Chinese people as the beginning of social and political reform?

Developing greater urbanity and reinforcing social equity via environmental awareness are closely related. They also reflect the Chinese government's purported interest in making "harmony" a guiding theme for the country's modernization. These issues are not unique to Shanghai, given the present bill for China's colossal environmental damages. Although a framework of environmental laws and regulations in China does exist, significant problems persist because environmental protection is often subverted by local protectionism, corruption, and regulatory inefficiency.⁶

In August 2003, the cargo vessel collision of "Changyang" caused 2,761.5 tons of oil-contaminated waste being dumped into the Huangpu River. The accident occurred around major waterworks serving Shanghai municipality, resulting in an oil slick two hundred meters long and twenty meters wide. It was, and still is, the largest oil spill disaster to occur. The boat held responsible was never charged with damages, and the oil slick was only cleaned up weeks later, after it had already wreaked environmental havoc.⁷

While the government publicly announced that the water was safe to drink again after the cleanup, a local study has revealed five years after the incident that men who drank water from the previously polluted section of the Huangpu River were approximately three times more likely to develop esophageal cancer, suggesting that there are probably many other side effects that remain unaccounted for.⁸ The government's management of the oil spill outraged many citizens and galvanized protests in Shanghai advocating for preservation of the Huangpu River and prevention of further pollution. This grassroots campaign marks the incipient rise of a new social and political movement in China: an environmental movement that aims to influence consumer behavior, business practices, and government policies without directly challenging state power.

Unlike earlier social movements that sought explicit political change, like the Tiananmen Square revolt, the Huangpu River

environmental movement spearheaded by scholars and university students aimed to raise public consciousness and solve specific problems. Advocates consciously try to promote gradual political change with practicing active citizen participation, individual opinions, self-responsibility, and rational debate – all quintessential democratic values. Relying on media publicity and international support, the beginning of the Huangpu River environmental movement reflects a larger trend within China of using legitimate and peaceful channels to build an organizational base for collective action.⁹ Chinese environmental activists represent a new breed of practical, idealistic, and often well-educated youth who practice self-reliance and independence – both new concepts in China. As such, the environmental movement's rise is indicative of the expansion of space for political participation and the growing differentiation of multiple groups in Chinese society.

The Huangpu River oil spill was the monumental catalyst that spurred a growing environmental movement in which the public resists special interest groups and opposes the state's environmentally unfriendly behaviors. Through protecting the environment, the people were able to fight for their civil rights and effect a push towards greater democracy in the country. Citizens, environmental organizations, and journalists found more democratic space in the "green" realm of politics, influencing the behaviors of the government and special interests by writing articles, opening forums, launching grassroots campaigns, and encouraging environmental education.

Through the Huangpu River campaign, activists appealed to citizens' personal and cultural attachment to the river as a symbol of Shanghai – both historically and in modern society. In October 2003, the Chinese State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) organized two forums to discuss the environmental implications of the oil spill and state of pollution in the Huangpu River. Even though these forums were highly controversial and opposed by the Chinese government as an attack on their legitimacy and ability to resolve national issues, the publicity that the state opposition received played an important role in tipping the balance in favor of environmental advocates. The Huangpu River campaign demonstrated several strategic attributes that would characterize the emerging Chinese environmental movement. The first notable feature was that environmental groups played an important role in mobilizing public opposition to the government's response to the catastrophe and raising public awareness about the river's dire condition of pollution. In December 2003, Friends of Nature, the country's first legal nonprofit

group that was founded in 1994 managed to mobilize 10,000 college students to sign a petition letter demanding that the government take a more active role in protecting the Huangpu River and the Shanghai municipality affected by related pollution problems. In January 2004, more public forums were organized in Shanghai to discuss the economic, social, and ecological impact of pollution on the Huangpu River, focusing on the detrimental effects on water quality and diminished value of the river in fueling industrial growth.¹⁰ These forums highlighted criticisms of the unacceptable pollution levels in the Huangpu River as endangering the health of local residents and destroying the beauty of an important symbol of national identity.

In February, a group of journalists, environmentalists, and researchers conducted a tour along the Huangpu River, carrying out a study on pollution conditions, then developed a photo exhibit accessible to the public.¹¹ These photos were particularly effective in communicating the need for environmental protection to the masses, many of whom were still illiterate and hence unable to read newspaper articles, or do not have access to media outlets (televisions were still rare at the time among the general Chinese population). The exhibits were tactfully placed in downtown Shanghai to ensure that it received a high volume of spectators daily, and I remember being overwhelmed with images that captured the reality of pollution every day when I took the subway to school.

Within a few days after the release of the photo exhibits, concern over cleaning up the Huangpu River became almost viral in Shanghai and generated prolific publicity nationwide – hundreds of scholarly essays were published on the dangers of river pollution, online forums discussing the issue were created overnight, and the idea of protecting the river became a hot topic among locals engaging in colloquial conversations. The widespread influence of these exhibits was a significant factor in shaping the perspectives of locals towards environmental protectionism and led to the successful mobilization of citizens to advocate for more effective environmental laws.

The second feature of the movement was the organized use of a range of mediums for collective action through public forums, petition letters, study tours, photo exhibits, websites, and



Upper Whampoo River, Shanghai, 1901. as. Theodor Hartner



tal activists engage in to influence political developments in Chinese life has been considered by many scholars as “an environmental path to political change.”¹³ Because environmental protection has less political sensitivity, it can

more easily lead to social consensus and cooperative agreements. As such, the Chinese have chosen to turn environmental issues into political issues, using environmental protection as a more subtle, but influential, way of approaching democracy.¹⁴

From the issues surrounding the Huangpu River, it is evident that environmental pollution and degradation is costly to Chinese economic productivity, damaging to public health, and engenders social unrest. The environment serves as a locus for broader political discontent in contemporary Chinese society and calls for nationwide political reforms. Thus far, China’s reform process has brought a unique dynamism and energy to the nature of its environmental challenges, integrating ancient cultural attitudes with new technologies. This infusion of historical perspectives with modern ideas creates an interplay of economic development and environmental protectionism that demands the consideration of an array of potential outcomes.

So what will China’s future environmental path look like? The conflict between China’s economic growth and environmental protection can no longer be ignored, but it is difficult to achieve both goals harmoniously, especially considering how China wants to double the size of its economy by 2020.¹⁵ However, the Chi-

nese environmental movement is still making gradual progress as “green” groups are cropping up throughout China and beginning to make an impact. At present, there are nearly 3,500 environmental groups in China’s nascent civil society. However, the movement is still very young: the organizations are small and they do not have much funding (Li 2010). Nevertheless, this environmental movement in 21st century China is one of the most exciting landmarks in the country’s course of development, oriented towards reducing the risks from China’s worsening environment, while also bringing more democratic rights to citizens.

Given the changing nature of both China’s economy and its evolving political system, assessing Shanghai’s environmental future on issues concerning the Huangpu River and its broader implications for China as a whole is no easy task and completely open to speculation. In Shanghai, public attitudes towards the environment are evolving as rapidly as new skyscrapers are rising. The environmental movement represents a transitional moment for China: for the past three decades, the government has passed increasingly strict environmental laws, but the expectation that these regulations would be upheld was almost nonexistent. It remains an open question as to what degree the Chinese government, wary of the possibility of its authority being challenged, will continue to expand the political flexibility afforded to environmental campaigns. In China’s history, leaders have often achieved greatness at the expense of nature through grand-scale development projects that control and exploit the environment for man’s own benefit. But today, greatness may well depend upon straying off this traditional route and developing a new relationship between man and the environment by following the natural flow of the river of democracy instead. ■

email. The rise of the environmental movement in China coincided with the development of the internet; it represented a new resource for Chinese environmental groups to make up for lack of resources and overcome political constraints. The Huangpu River campaign website (www.huangpu.ngo.cn) played an essential role in disseminating information to the public.¹² The new repertoire of platforms for collective action was a successful, constructive effort aimed at promoting debate, public participation, and environmental awareness.

A third component of the campaign that led to its success was its international engagement and support, encouraged by direct funding for organized activities from external sources. Public forums were sponsored by environmental groups from the United States and Hong Kong. Activists stressed the importance of environmental protection to maintain good relations with the international community, and worked to build direct international support.

Media professionals played an important role in helping raise public awareness via information dissemination through the media. By exposing facts regarding the Huangpu River case and the inadequacy of the government’s response to the oil spill through news articles, public radio, and television broadcasts, the campaign was able to generate a high level of environmental consciousness and social concern.

All these aspects played pivotal roles in making the Huangpu River campaign successful in raising environmental consciousness, promoting cultural change, and prompting solutions to river pollution. A decade ago, it would have been difficult to imagine how the Chinese public could protest and resist the government’s decision on large issues such as an oil spill cleanup and pollution problems that would affect the whole city. Today, the public has more power to fight against polluters, hinder government decisions, and even change environmental policies while protecting their own rights. The approach Chinese environmen-

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