

Yangtze floods and the Chinese government's self-satisfied response

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This year's floods in China have officially caused some 1,000 deaths and forced over 5.5 million people to evacuate their homes. Last year's floods, recognised as the most severe this century, affected over 240 million people, killed over 4,000 and inflicted US\$30.7 billion in damage.

Using the logic that anything is smaller if compared to something larger, the state-run Chinese newspapers, such as the *Peoples Daily* and *China Daily*, have therefore hailed this year's lower death and damage toll as a great achievement by the central government and evidence of its efforts to protect “the safety of people's lives and wealth”.

An article in the English language web version of the *China Daily* on July 8 cited experiences this year in the Dongting Lake region—one of the most flood-prone areas of China—as an example of the regime's success.

Dongting Lake and the surrounding wetlands constitute the main catchment area for the water that courses down from the Himalayas and ultimately makes up the main body of the Yangtze River. Each summer the volume of water in the lake, and its surface area, increases exponentially.

The *China Daily* said “flooding in Dongting Lake this year was nearly as serious as last year but resulted in only 25 percent of the damage” and went on to explain how this reduced damage was accomplished.

According to a director of the Flood Control and Drought Relief Headquarters in Hunan province, embankments and dykes protecting 16,000 hectares were leveled and floodwaters allowed to engulf the area. Over 140,000 people were forced to evacuate, losing their homes and land.

Describing the government's national flood prevention plan, the *China Daily* continued: “The State Council, China's cabinet decided to level some

protective embankments surrounding low-laying fields in the lakeside areas and islands along the Yangtze to reduce mounting damage caused by devastating floods like those last summer, despite losing the farmland in these areas.

“Under the scheme, flood-storage areas and detention basins capable of holding 32 billion cubic meters of water are scheduled to be built along the Yangtze and its water system, including Dongting Lake, within about 10 years.”

“Such an operation would affect some 3.3 million residents and 5,900 square kilometres of land, including 340,000 hectares of fertile land, along the Yangtze and in lakeside areas.”

In other words, the Chinese authorities are proposing to allow the Yangtze River and Dongting Lake to flood low-lying farmland inhabited by millions of people.

Far from being a great accomplishment by the government, such a course of action is a damning indictment of the policies it pursued in the past, especially in the highpoint of Mao Zedong's rule during the 1950s and 1960s.

To meet Mao's bureaucratic decree that China become self-sufficient in grain—under conditions where the country lacked the material or technical resources to improve the technique and quality of agriculture—the regime reclaimed land along rivers and wetlands, including Lake Dongting, in order to convert it to farmland and other uses.

Despite the death of 30,000 people in the devastating 1954 Yangtze floods, the regime sabotaged the natural defences against flooding in the middle and lower Yangtze regions. The water storage capacity of Lake Dongting shrank from 29.3 billion cubic metres in 1949 to only 17.8 billion cubic metres by 1998.

Flooding occurs in the Dongting area once every five

years, compared with once every 41 years a century ago. Higher than average rainfalls of the last two years have created a disaster. Not only have areas surrounding Dongting been severely inundated but serious flooding has occurred further down the Yangtze, threatening at one point the major industrial city of Wuhan. Now, with the catastrophic consequences of previous policies being revealed, the regime is mapping out a scheme to reverse the previous land reclamations.

The victims are two-fold. Firstly, there are the thousands who lost their lives and homes over the last two years in floods. Secondly, hundreds of thousands of people, most of them peasant farmers settled by the government in the reclaimed areas, will now be forcibly relocated as the land is restored to the lakes and rivers.

It is unlikely that these people will receive any adequate compensation. Many will never recover from the loss of employment and livelihood and will join the ever-growing ranks of China's unemployed and impoverished.

No critique or exposure of this is taking place in China. Instead, according to the state-controlled media, the government has dealt, in magnificent style, with unpredictable climatic conditions outside its control.

Lu Xun, one of the great thinkers of the democratic May 4th Movement in the first decades of this century, made a famous attack on the then ruling elite for issuing telegrams that blamed God for the woes befalling China. Lu quipped, "God replied in dismay: 'But I wasn't even there!'"



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