

## BOOK REVIEW

Qiliang He,

*The People's West Lake:*

*Propaganda, Nature, and Agency in Mao's China, 1949-1976,*

(Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023)

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One of the most salutary trends in recent scholarship on China is the growing recognition that while only humans write History, nonhumans contribute enormously to the making of history.<sup>1</sup> Qiliang He's new book is an admirable entrant to the growing field of more-than-human histories, which aspire to explain how people and nonhumans shape each other's lives. He provides many examples of people putting landscapes and resources to their own uses, in ways that frustrated official plans. But he particularly emphasizes the "nonpurposive" agency of nonhuman beings, including microbes, pigs, and moths. The author rejects more exclusive understandings of "conscious and purposive" agency, typical of deliberate human action. Instead, he argues that simply by pursuing their own interests, such as survival and reproduction, nonhuman entities significantly altered and sometimes foiled the plans and policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The book clears space for a range of meaningful agents and actions far beyond the conventional focus on negotiations between "state" and "society." A significant contribution to exciting conversations in the field of environmental history in China and beyond, this book deserves a wide and attentive readership.

The author develops his argument in five chapters, each a case study of at least one nonhuman agent near the famed West Lake of the eastern city of Hangzhou. He performs a valuable service by challenging readers to see the environment as more than a lump of clay that powerful humans can mold to suit their needs and desires. Instead, he shows how the presence, behavior, and metabolism of several kinds of nonhuman agents influenced and constrained human campaigns to remake West Lake in the early decades of the People's Republic.

Chapter 1, "Water, Labor, and Microbes," focuses on the dredging of West Lake in the 1950s. Like the other campaigns in this book, dredging served goals both practical and propagandistic. Pragmatically, a deeper lake might moderate the microclimate of the region, enhance public hygiene by flushing stagnant urban waterways, and potentially yield water resources for farming. Ideologically, the unprecedentedly rapid and ambitious program of dredging was to strengthen the new Communist government's claim to technological competence and political legitimacy. The author persuasively shows how the Party's grand plans came to grief due to the resistance of both human workers and aquatic bacteria and algae. Most of the laborers for this project were prisoners and counter-revolutionaries, who were "notorious for their extremely low efficiency" [p. 29]. These human agents hampered the dredging project by dragging their feet, running away, and in extreme cases, killing themselves. Deepening the lake also disrupted its delicate ecological balance. Sunlight could no longer reach the bottom, limiting the growth of underwater plants and creating ideal conditions for unhelpful bacteria to multiply [p.39]. A dramatic red tide in 1958 arose from these conditions, undermining the CCP's claim to have purified a lake that previous regimes had neglected or befouled.

The author is careful to note that the recalcitrant human workers and troublesome microbes were not intentionally opposing the state's "propaganda-campaign." Rather, the people and germs that "slipped the leash of human plans" were advancing their own interests and priorities as they perceived them [p. 45]. This point is significant and well made. Deliberate, conscious, articulated resistance is but one form of subaltern agency, albeit the version that

appeals most to text-bound historians. Here and throughout, the author convincingly demonstrates the “nonpurposive” agency of beings (human or otherwise) whose actions and/or physiological processes demand human responses.

Chapter 2, “Watching Fish at the Flower Harbor,” shows how the Party and various sectors of society grappled over how to make and enjoy the social space of a “new-style public park” [p.48]. He argues against the notion of an “innocent,” prelapsarian version of everyday life into which a bumptious state intruded. Rather, the creation of this park was “a constitutive element in the making of a new type of everydayness” [p. 49]. Whereas the Party hoped to make a public park into a political space, ordinary citizens preferred to use it for “trysts, casual walks, tea consumption, or poaching aquatic creatures” [p. 50]. In this way, “the political, the discursive, and the personal could be mutually constitutive” [p. 67]. The author suggests that these strands were interwoven in the park’s eponymous goldfish. To intellectuals, the fish suggested the whimsy and freedom of Zhuangzi; to young anglers, they were “troph[ies]”; while on the national stage, the fish were “a vital prop in the political realm,” drawing the breathless approval of visiting worthies such as the US President Richard Nixon. Clearly, these multivalent animals exerted agency in several significant ways. Still, I would have liked a bit more attention to the experiences of these sentient beings. Getting hauled from the water by a jagged hook through the lip must be an ordeal. We will return to this matter shortly.

Chapter 3, “Forests, Propaganda, and Agency,” shows how the afforestation of West Lake’s environs fit within the long-term ideological campaigns of “making green the motherland” and “garden-ization of the earth.” The author deploys two perspectives on such programs: a “vertical view” focusing on the state’s implementation of its environmental policies, and a “side view” attentive to how “local citizens negotiated with the state, shaped their subjectivities in socialism, and reaped the benefits” [p. 70]. As in other chapters, He shows how afforestation “fostered its own nonconformists,” including tea farmers who wanted to use the woodlands for their own ends, as well as nonhuman beings, most notably the voracious pine moth [p. 71]. Pursuing quick results, the CCP continued its Nationalist predecessor’s

program of planting large numbers of fast-growing horsetail pines. But when forestry authorities neglected the “slow and continuous process of upkeep,” huge percentages of these trees perished within a few years [p.76]. Ironically, this mismanagement created space for other forms of life. The author connects the Party’s failure to practice “modern scientific forestry” to the region’s “slightly higher biodiversity than in a proper monoculture plantation” [p.77].

Still, the overreliance on a single species, planted in excessive densities, provided ideal conditions for opportunistic agents. These included the pine moth, which “constituted about 80 percent of pest infestation in Hangzhou as well as in other parts of Zhejiang” [p.84]. Lacking adequate pesticides, forestry officials gave rewards for captured moths, to mobilize large numbers of workers to catch the bugs by hand. In response, cagey villagers maximized their own gains at the expense of the public good, catching big moths while ignoring small ones, and only grabbing the most accessible bugs [p.85]. Hasty, uniform tree planting appealed to the vertical view of central planners. Yet from the side view, the artificial forests attracted both profit-seeking human moth catchers, and hungry bugs who “impelled humans to respond to their presence and actions” [p.88].

Incidentally, the author uses both simplified characters and *Hanyu Pinyin* romanization for the Nationalist Party or Guomindang (Kuomintang 國民黨). There is a case for consistency in transliteration between the PRC and ROC, particularly if the target audience includes non-specialists who may not understand the symbolic freight that these terms carry. Nevertheless, adopting the CCP’s preferred spelling seems ill-advised when scholars are wary of reinforcing hegemonic hierarchies by uncritically reproducing the language of dominant powers. The book, for instance, is published by the University of Hawai‘i Press, whose name includes the *okina* punctuation mark in deference to local practice. More to the point, the Nationalists used Wade-Giles notation even before the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, and the system remains standard in Taiwan. Overriding people’s demonstrated preferences seems to require some explanation from

the author. Doing otherwise is distracting, much as when British journalists write about “Nasa” or the American Secretary of “Defence.” Quibbles over romanization do not seriously diminish the value of this fine book. Yet orthography is rich in political meaning. If the People’s Liberation Army takes the island, does anyone doubt that mapmakers will replace Taipei with Taibei, and Kaohsiung with Gaoxiong? Why should authors make this change before the Taiwanese people themselves?

Chapter 4, “Socialist Pigs,” examines how human and nonhuman agents complicated the government’s national campaign to raise pigs for fertilizer. Although state authorities sought economies of scale by raising pigs in collective farms, the overcrowded, unvaccinated animals manifested a form of “anticollectivism” due to their vulnerability to epidemics such as hog cholera [p. 92-93]. Pigs raised by individual families fared better, “undermin[ing] the CCP’s endeavor of reorganizing labor and peasants’ day-to-day life in the countryside.” The author provides statistical evidence that China’s “swine population was inversely proportional to the degree of collectivization” before the Cultural Revolution [p.97]. Considering how many villagers wished to keep small private plots for growing the pigs’ fodder, while the animals died *en masse* in collective farms, the author identifies “collusion between humans and nonhuman creatures” to foil the program of large-scale, intensive hog production and the broader aim of collectivization [p.113]. He astutely notes that this resistance differs from the deliberate “counteraction” 反行为 identified by scholars such as the late Gao Wangling. Hangzhou’s hogs and their farmers were not “wheeling and dealing” or “defrauding the state,” but simply yielding to the biological principle that closely confined animals are attractive hosts for a range of deadly pathogens.

As with the goldfish in Chapter 2, I would have appreciated more discussion of how the confined pigs, as sentient beings, felt as they died of painful diseases. The literature of veterinary medicine and neuroscience provides plenty of evidence for careful claims about this ghastly sensory experience. Regrettably, while the author recognizes the pigs’ ability to challenge human agendas, the animals here figure as commodities, not sensitive beings capable

of fear, love, and pain. Overlooking these animals’ emotional capacities inadvertently serves to justify brutal and exploitative methods of intensive hog production, such as the newly built 26-floor “pig skyscraper” in Hubei Province that will soon slaughter one million animals per year.<sup>2</sup> The so-called “African Swine Flu” that has killed tens of millions of Chinese pigs can also be traced to such intensive confinement facilities. These systems can only survive if consumers (and readers) remain blind to their inherent cruelty. Frankly recognizing that eating pork often means abusing intelligent animals is a step toward healthier relations among humans, pigs, and microbes.

Chapter 5, “Ghosts as Neighbors,” addresses campaigns to protect or demolish the lakeside tombs of historic luminaries including the renowned beauty Su Xiaoxiao and the anti-Qing revolutionary Qiu Jin. The author skillfully demonstrates how struggles over public memory and the use of space reflected the charged issue of class labeling, with “preservationists and iconoclastic Maoists” arguing over whether the entombed truly belonged to “the People” [p.115]. In one absurd and illuminating example, locals destroyed the grave of a Ming-dynasty minister of defense because his title resembled that of the deposed Marshal Peng Dehuai.

For all its merits, this chapter is the least convincing version of the author’s claim for nonhuman agency. The author acknowledges that tombs, unlike the other living agents in earlier chapters, were “wholly artificial.” He classifies them as a “topos,” or “the interface between human imagination and...physicality” [p. 139]. To the extent that the tombs affected human plans, they did so as potent symbols in the minds of their admirers and detractors.

Agency is a powerful concept, but it can be overburdened. Even accepting, as I do, the author’s suggestion that tombs “‘acted back on’ humans” [p. 116], tombs and pigs do not share the same kind or degree of agency. Sentient and social, like their owners, pigs make decisions based on their preferences and aversions. They learn quickly, adjust to new situations, and modify their living environments. Tombs do none of these things. Classifying both pigs and tombs simply as agents

thus flattens and stretches the concept of agency beyond the point of analytical value. In this schema, agency appears as a binary: some things have it, and some do not.

I would have appreciated a more nuanced approach to agency, which might place it along a spectrum. For instance, a dissident protesting in the street embodies and expresses her agency in ways that directly elicit responses from the state and from society at large. Her agency is not inherent but situational: locked in a prison cell, the same dissident must radically change her political praxis in response to her new material conditions. To intervene in public affairs, she now largely depends on her supporters, who rally to her inspiring example as a hero or martyr. In a sense, she has pig-like agency while free, and tomb-like agency in jail.

The concept of subjecthood could be helpful here. Every subject is an agent, but not every agent is a subject. To borrow the philosopher Thomas Nagel's deathless phrase, *there is something that it is like to be a goldfish, a pine moth, a pig, or a prisoner*.<sup>3</sup> Some pioneering researchers even find subjecthood within the plant kingdom.<sup>4</sup> Human minds, calibrated to our own bounded bodies and senses, cannot fully grasp what it is like to be a bug or a hog, and still less a pine tree. But our sensory limitations do not negate the reality of these beings' inner lives, whatever form they may take.

Subjecthood, like agency, is shaped by embodied experience. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum, treating animals as both agents and subjects, suggests that all sentient beings deserve "the chance for a flourishing life, a life with the type of dignity relevant to that species."<sup>5</sup> This analytical framework is useful for scholars who wish to evaluate the changing fortunes of nonhuman subjects under various modes of political economy. A sow confined in a tiny farrowing crate and a wild boar roaming through a forest are both agents. But our analysis need not end here. A specific arrangement of capital and labor has sharply limited the captive pig's subjecthood, denying her the chance to flourish. The boar, meanwhile, enjoys far greater freedom and discretion in his choices. Flourishing does not imply a life free of pain or sorrow, but an opportunity to live in accordance with what Nussbaum calls each

animal's "capabilities." Historians have done essential work in showing how shifting political regimes have affected the lived experiences of human subjects. Qiliang He has vividly shown how nonhuman entities acted upon human endeavors. A next step might be to show how these sentient subjects experienced their encounters with people.

Qiliang He's book is a humbling and vital reminder that humans are just one of many interlinked constituencies in any project of environmental modification. This summer, as our carbon-choked planet breaks temperature records, the author's findings could not be more timely. Long-buried germs are emerging from soggy permafrost, while novel pathogens spilling out of our industrial slaughterhouses have already killed millions of wild birds and mammals.<sup>6</sup> Many of us have grown used to seeing humanity as the indispensable species, the intrepid captain of Starship Earth. But our boat is leaky, and the crew is restless. Mutiny can be silent, like a virus. Or it can squeal, shriek, growl, and roar.

#### Questions:

I would be grateful for the author's insights on several questions that arose as I read this stimulating book.

- 1) You make the case for West Lake as an ideal site for "examining the changing conceptualization of culture and nature in post-1949 China" [p. 2]. The book's consistent focus on Hangzhou is valuable. I wonder how specific the relationships between human and nonhuman agents were to this locale. China has many cities with lakes, but few have hosted imperial capitals, or served as iconic representations of China to foreign tourists. Do you have any sense of the power of nonhuman agents in other, less prominent sites? Would we expect to find nonhumans interacting with humans in similar ways? Or was Hangzhou unique?
- 2) You have gleaned a great deal of information from the available sources. Might your conclusions have been different with the easier access to archival materials that scholars enjoyed in the first decade of this century? Is there anything you would have liked to explore further?



- 3) What surprised you most in writing this book?
- 4) Can you share anything about your next project?

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<sup>1</sup> See Micah Muscolino, *The Ecology of War in China: Henan Province, the Yellow River, and Beyond, 1938–1950*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016; Roel Sterckx, Martina Siebert, and Dagmar Schäfer, eds., *Animals through Chinese History: Earliest Times to 1911*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020; Liz P.Y. Chee, *Mao's Bestiary: Medicinal Animals and Modern China*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Guardian Staff, “China’s 26-storey pig skyscraper ready to slaughter 1 million pigs a year,” [Accessed August 3, 2023 at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/nov/25/chinas-26-storey-pig-skyscraper-ready-to-produce-1-million-pigs-a-year>]

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Nagel, “What is it Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review*, Volume 83, Number 4, (October 1974), pp. 435–450.

<sup>4</sup> Paco Calvo with Natalie Lawrence, *Planta Sapiens: Unmasking Plant Intelligence*, London: The Bridge Street Press, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 351.

<sup>6</sup> Katie Hunt, “Scientists have revived a ‘zombie’ virus that spent 48,500 years frozen in permafrost,” CNN.com [Accessed August 3, 2023 at <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/08/world/permafrost-virus-risk-climate-science/index.html>]; World Health Organization, “Ongoing avian influenza outbreaks in animals pose risk to humans,”

[Accessed August 3, 2023 at <https://www.who.int/news/item/12-07-2023-ongoing-avian-influenza-outbreaks-in-animals-pose-risk-to-humans>]

## Response

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Dr. Peter Braden's review of my newest book, *The People's West Lake: Propaganda, Nature, and Agency in Mao's China, 1949–1976*, is well-written and thought-provoking. I appreciate Dr. Braden's summary of the book and many of his comments on various aspects of the book. In response to Dr. Braden's book review, I would like to address two points he emphatically makes. The first one is a relatively minor issue (at least to my understanding): spelling. In particular, Dr. Braden takes issue with my use of simplified characters and pinyin romanization for the Nationalist Party or 国民党. While Dr. Braden views it as a matter with political implications, namely, "reinforcing hegemonic hierarchies by uncritically reproducing the language of dominant powers," for me, it only serves the purpose of stylistic consistency. Interestingly enough, about a decade ago when I submitted a paper for publication, I used "KMT" as the abbreviation of the Nationalist Party. However, a reviewer was quick to point out that I needed to spell it as Guomindang, probably for the same reason I have mentioned.

The second issue is quite important for anyone interested in nonhuman studies. Dr. Braden suggests a different approach to understanding and studying nonhuman beings and their agency. In short, Dr. Braden calls for an exploration of "how these *sentient* subjects experienced their encounters with people" (My italics). In this way, readers are marshaled into a new paradigm of investigating the "inner lives" of sentient beings, such as animals, despite human beings' "sensory limitations." I think that Dr. Braden's point takes on great importance as he acknowledges the objectiveness of things and beings external to humans. As Thomas Nigel notes, "[t]he less it depends on a specifically human viewpoint, the more objective is our description."<sup>1</sup> By comparison, I adopt a different approach in my foray into the world of nonhuman beings. I put

emphasis on the nonhumans' impact on humans and then, the latter's responses. In other words, although I recognize the autonomic agency of nonhuman entities, I insist that such agency could be gauged only through the interactions between humans and nonhumans. Hence, the nonhuman agency becomes analyzable without a differentiation between the sentient and the non-sentient. I'm not saying that exploring the inner world of sentient beings is of little significance. In a sense, humans' deep desire to peek into sentient beings' inner lives itself sheds light on nonhuman beings' capacity to exert a certain degree of control over humans.

More importantly, I gain inspiration from scholars who underscore the "assemblage" of human and nonhuman entities. Namely, the agency is valid because it is a group.<sup>2</sup> Or, in Jane Benett's words, "all things are spun together in a dense web." Only by understanding such a human-nonhuman grouping, can one recognize the "thing power."<sup>3</sup> Honestly, I admit that I was quite hesitant about inserting a lengthy discussion of the ANT (Actor-network theory) while working on the book manuscript. Finally, I decided to leave it out essentially because I was unwilling to delve deep into exploring such a theory lest it might water down meaningful analyses of some aspects of Mao-era China. Methodologically different as we are, Dr. Braden and I both constitute an attempt to dismantle anthropocentrism inherent in social constructionism in academia in the past several decades.

Aside from the two points I would like to clear up, hereunder are my replies to four questions Dr. Braden raises:

- 1) You make the case for West Lake as an ideal site for "examining the changing conceptualization of culture and nature in post-1949 China" [p. 2]. The book's

consistent focus on Hangzhou is valuable. I wonder how specific the relationships between human and nonhuman agents were to this locale. China has many cities with lakes, but few have hosted imperial capitals, or served as iconic representations of China to foreign tourists. Do you have any sense of the power of nonhuman agents in other, less prominent sites? Would we expect to find nonhumans interacting with humans in similar ways? Or was Hangzhou unique?

Hangzhou provides a superb case for studying culture and nature because of its significance, politically and diplomatically, in Mao-era China, as I have indicated numerous times throughout the book. Meanwhile, West Lake has historically undergone unending human intervention. I argue that West Lake is very close to being an artificial waterbody because of the input of human labor generation after generation. Hence, it is the interface of human society and nature. In the Anglophone world, Beijing's reconstruction in post-1949 China has been studied quite extensively, but the scholarship focuses mainly on human efforts to make it a political space. In other words, the collaboration and contestation between human and nonhuman entities has received inadequate attention. I hope my research into West Lake in Mao's China can fill the void.

- 2) You have gleaned a great deal of information from the available sources. Might your conclusions have been different with the easier access to archival materials that scholars enjoyed in the first decade of this century? Is there anything you would have liked to explore further?

I'm fortunate to study the city of Hangzhou because its political authorities, for decades, made a great effort to publish archival documents produced in both pre-1949 and post-1949 times. I also spent some time perusing archival materials collected in the Zhejiang Provincial Archives and the Hangzhou Municipal Archives. I didn't feel it particularly difficult to gain access to archives when I conducted

my research in the mid-2010s. Probably, some archival sources became inaccessible as soon as archives across China began to digitize those materials. But I'm not very sure about that. Also, my conclusion would not have been very different, had I enjoyed the opportunities to access other sources. At the least, information about the campaigns for rebuilding the city and the lake in the past several decades is usually open to the public. After finishing this project, I may consider further exploring the gentrification of Hangzhou after 2000. But this will be a long-term goal.

- 3) What surprised you most in writing this book?

I thought I would write a book about the history of landscape in China, for creating and experiencing a piece of landscape work are highly politicized and ideologized everywhere in the world. However, the project ended up focusing on nonhuman entities and their relationships with humans. It shows how dramatically things could change during a research project. This is the beauty of being a historian and conducting historical research. Indeed, it's like "a box of chocolates you never know what you're gonna get."

- 4) Can you share anything about your next project?

I work on three projects on film history. I have published one, *Working the System: Motion Picture, Filmmakers, and Subjectivities in Mao-Era China, 1949–1966* (Hong Kong University Press, 2023). *Working the System* and *The People's West Lake* have one thing in common: They both question the legitimacy of the resistance-collaboration paradigm to study the history of the People's Republic of China. I always believe that I have made an inadequate analysis of a keyword in the title of *The People's West Lake*, namely, "People." Therefore, I plan on writing a monograph on the people's cinema to give me a renewed opportunity to investigate how the "People" was conceptualized and what it stood for in Mao's China.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nagel, "What is it Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review*, Volume 83, Number 4, (October 1974): 444.

<sup>2</sup> Lori J. Marso "Freaks of Nature," *Political Theory*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (June 2011): 424.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Bennett "The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter," *Political Theory*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (June 2004): 354.