

Nathanael Fritz
12/04/2025
History 228

A Disregard for the People and the Land: Nationalist Relief Policies in WWII

British reporting on the Japanese advance toward Wuhan in the summer of 1938 paints a grim picture of environmental disaster and military violence. Footage cuts to the explosive recoil of artillery and then to the stream of bullet casings being ejected from a Japanese machine gun. Meanwhile, a beleaguered soldier drags his compatriot through water as a monotone voice states “hampering the Nipponese (Japanese) troops are the floods of the Yellow River. Even where the waters have not covered the earth, the ground that once was firm is now a swamp.”¹ The inundation of the fighting was no accident: in 1938, the desperate Chinese Nationalists intentionally unleashed a massive flood in order to buy time to prepare defences in Wuhan, drowning swathes of Central China in water. The footage then cuts to a scene outside the gates of Wuhan, as a mob of refugees fleeing violence and floodwaters are held back by Chinese soldiers. In the years to follow, the region would continue to produce more and more refugees as the toll of war and floods would make the land increasingly unliveable, leaving the Chinese government the grim task of managing the fallout caused as a consequence of their own plan.

China’s War of Resistance against the Japanese from 1937 to 1945 caused mass destruction and the internal displacement of millions of Chinese seeking to escape violence, environmental disaster, and death. In the provinces most affected by the Yellow River flood, like Henan, Jiangsu, and Anhui, thousands died and millions more were displaced from their homes due to the “second order effects”² of warfare: environmental degradation, plague, and famine. Although the GMD was restricted in the efficacy of its relief efforts due to limited resources,

¹ British Pathé. *Japan Advances on Hankou*. Newsreel. London: British Pathé, 1938.

² Muscolino, Micah S. “Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China’s Henan Province, 1938-1945.” *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 293.

analysis of journalism from this time reveals that the GMD's prioritization of military needs over the wellbeing of its citizens as well as poor implementation of relief policies by local officials turned an environmental disaster into a humanitarian one. Relief policies for communities devastated by flooding consistently pitted military needs for resources and manpower against refugee needs for a way to make a living and the need to reconstruct rural agricultural infrastructure. While these policies may have contributed to the Chinese war effort, mismanagement and a neglect for refugees' basic needs accelerated environmental degradation that led to disillusionment with the Nationalist government. In Henan, Jiangsu, and Anhui, local officials' inability to manage floodwaters properly, coupled with drought and an exorbitant grain tax on local farmers, led to the Henan famine of 1942 to 1943, taking the lives of another 1.5 to 3 million people. In the face of environmental disaster, the Nationalist government proved itself incapable of containing the fallout of the disaster of its own making, and this failure would contribute to the victory of the Communists in the coming Chinese civil war.

Much environmental/historical work has already been published on the effects of the 1938 Yellow River flood, offering various lenses through which to view its course and significance. Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley is a professor of Late Imperial and Modern Chinese History at San Diego State University, and in her article *Between War and Water*, she argues that the failure of GMD relief policies to sufficiently support disaster victims led to popular disillusionment. Diana Lary argues that the strategic breaching of the Yellow River dikes was a choice borne from the Nationalist government's desperation, and that the humanitarian crisis that followed outweighed the minor military benefits that were the result. Micah Muscolino, a Chinese history professor from the University of California San Diego, analyzes how environmental change impacted the flight of refugees during the flood, and the effects that

resettling those refugees had on the landscapes of resettlement sites like at Huanglongshan. While previous works on this subject have often focused specifically on either the military, social, or environmental aspects of the Yellow River flood, this paper will seek to establish a connection between the environmental degradation caused by the flooding disaster and popular disillusionment that was the result. The successes and failures of the Nationalist leaders during the Yellow River disaster offer a case study on how they viewed and treated their people, and how that treatment would eventually lead to their replacement by the Communists.

The early years of the Sino-Japanese war were marked by repeated Japanese military victories against Chinese forces, which were forced to withdraw further and further west as the Japanese seized much of China's wealthiest regions in the North China plain and along the coast. By 1938, most of China's best conventional armies had been destroyed, the GMD capital at Nanjing had been lost and its population butchered, and the new capital at Wuhan was under threat by the relentless advance of Japanese forces.³ In a desperate attempt to buy time to prepare defences at Wuhan, Chiang Kai-Shek approved a plan to destroy dikes on the Yellow River to flood critical railways and delay or block Japanese movement in the area.⁴ After several failed attempts at a breach in early June at Zhaokou, a breach was finally achieved at a dike in Huayuankou on June 7, after which Nationalist soldiers continuously labored to expand the hole until the stream was "hundreds of feet across".⁵

Whether the Nationalist's plan to use "water in place of soldiers" was a success is highly disputed. Floodwaters that resulted from the breach did destroy key railroad tracks, preventing Japanese consolidation in flooded areas, and foreign newspapers reported that thousands of

³ Lary, Diana. "Drowned Earth: The Strategic Breaching of the Yellow River Dyke, 1938." *War in History* 8, no. (2001): 194.

⁴ Lary, Diana. "Drowned Earth": 197.

⁵ Lary, Diana. "Drowned Earth": 199.

Japanese troops “might be trapped and drowned throughout the area”.⁶ Moreover, many in the international community saw the flood as a symbol of China’s persistence against Japan’s claims in 1937 that it could “beat China to her knees in three months,” and that the war would likely be “very long, very difficult, and very costly” as a result.⁷ However, historians like Diana Lary see the flood as a military failure, as Japanese forces simply took another route around the flooding to get to Wuhan, which fell just five months after the breach in October 1938.⁸ Other historians like Muscolino view the flood as a minor strategic success, with the Japanese reevaluating how they could maneuver around the floodwaters, “giving Chinese forces a chance to withdraw and regroup,” but concludes that the military advantages of the flood “paled in comparison to the staggering price.”⁹ Weighed against its questionable military strategic effects, the legacy of the Yellow River flood is best remembered for the massive destruction that it caused to the Chinese provinces of Henan, Anhui, and Jiangsu, which would continue to experience flooding until the breach was finally plugged in 1947.

To call the results of the Huayuankou breach an environmental catastrophe would be an understatement. By November of 1938, missionaries in China reported that Henan alone had 3000 square miles affected by floods and that 800,000 people were in need of humanitarian aid.¹⁰ According to a report by the International Relief Commission, “two-thirds of the population have

⁶ By the Associated Press. 1938. "China Floods Kill 150,000; 30 Millions Flee to West: Thousands of Japanese Troops are Feared Trapped, Drowned. Chiang Revising His Government Natives, Invaders Trade Accusations of Cutting River Dikes. China's-Sorrows. Floods Kill Thousands. Flood Kills 150,000 Chinese; Japanese Fear for Soldiers China." *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*, Jun 15, 2.

⁷ "Tokyo Thought Concerned Over War Prospects: Paris Papers Stress Japan's Troubles in China FLOOD SAID THREAT TO NIPPON ARMIES 'War to be very Long, very Difficult, very Costly'." 1938.*The China Press (1925-1938)*, Jun 25, 4.

⁸ Lary, Diana. "Drowned Earth: The Strategic Breaching of the Yellow River Dyke, 1938." *War in History* 8, no. 2 (2001): 201.

⁹ Muscolino, Micah S. "Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China's Henan Province, 1938-1945." *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 295.

¹⁰ "Honon Relief Body Surveying Hwanwho Break: Worker Says Money Needed to Carry on Functions HELP URGED FOR 800,000 PEOPLE Finds 3,000 Sq. Miles Affected by Flood Condition." 1938.*The China Press (1925-1938)*, Nov 21, 5.

left. Houses have collapsed; live-stock drowned, sold, or in a starved condition; no possibility of either sowing or reaping. All along the edges of the inundated region bandits make life hazardous.”¹¹ Water from the Yellow River overflowed smaller rivers like the Huai, and with ever rising floodwaters in June of 1938, there were fears that water from the Huai and Yellow would overflow the Yangtze and lead to “one of the worst flood disasters in Chinese history”.¹² The number of people who drowned after the breach has often been distorted for political or propaganda purposes. While initial Japanese estimates stood at 300,000 drowned and post-war Communist estimates as many as 900,000, it is reasonable to assume that between 400,000-800,000 people died as a direct result of the sudden floodwaters.¹³¹⁴ Even after floodwaters subsided later that summer, the environmental changes that resulted still continued to affect local populations, as the silt that makes the Yellow River characteristically yellow was deposited over formerly productive farmland. These massive silt deposits resulted in severe degradation of soil fertility in 32% of fields in eastern Henan, and the accumulated layer of silt was so deep that some returning refugees could not even find their homes.¹⁵ In the dry season, the exposed, sunbaked silt became “hard as brick,” making it impossible to grow food.¹⁶ Moreover, since the break in the Huayuankou dike could not be repaired during the war and accumulated silt in the newly created waterways had no outlet, flooding became an annual event

¹¹ "Honan Relief Body Surveying Hwanwho Break, 5.

¹² “China’s Vast Flood Threatens to Unite Hwang Ho and Yangtze.” *The Science News-Letter* 34, no. 1 (1938): 5

¹³ Lary, Diana. “Drowned Earth: The Strategic Breaching of the Yellow River Dyke, 1938.” *War in History* 8, no. 2 (2001): 205-206.

¹⁴ Muscolino, Micah S. “Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China’s Henan Province, 1938-1945.” *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 295.

¹⁵ By Douglas Robertson Special Cable to THE NEW YORK TIMES. 1938. "CHINA FLOODS RUIN VAST FARM LANDS: YELLOW RIVER COVERS FERTILE AREA WITH SAND-WAL-OF WATER RUSHES SOUTH JAPANESE INCREASE FORCES DEATH ESTIMATE IS REDUCED CHINA FLOODS RUIN VAST FARM LANDS CHINESE CLAIM AN AIR VICTORY FLOODING OF HANKOW EXPECTED." *New York Times* (1923-), Jun 16, 1.

¹⁶ Muscolino, Micah S. “Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China’s Henan Province, 1938-1945.” *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 299.

in affected regions, with river flow experiencing “sudden shifts” that led to perennial flooding devastation.¹⁷

The obvious result of the crisis unleashed by the Yellow River flood was a massive displaced refugee population, with an estimated 4,000,000 people fleeing inundated areas.¹⁸ Although initially many people simply temporarily moved to high ground or to non-flooded areas, hunger soon set in as local food stores and relief supplies diminished and the threat of famine loomed. Although some people were able to return to their homes and start farming again, they faced challenges in creating a livelihood on land that was perennially threatened by the effects of new flooding. Some local people attempted to adapt to these conditions by building “high earthen platforms to put their food and possessions on” while others would abandon their farms during the high-water season and return to plant crops in the winter when the waters receded.¹⁹ Many refugees fled into cities and towns, which tended to be built on high ground and have protective dikes and polders that protected them from the worst of the flooding. Nevertheless, the region suffered from severe drops in agricultural productivity, with observers noting that flood affected areas only produced 50-75% of the usual amount of wheat in 1939, and the crops were always in danger of being destroyed by unexpected flooding. Henan’s uniquely “intensely anthropogenic landscape” that relied on “constant labor and upkeep” for the maintenance of rural infrastructure like terraces, paddies, polders, dikes, dams, and canals was particularly vulnerable should the supply of labor falter or upkeep fail to be completed on time.²⁰ As local infrastructure deteriorated, so too did local agricultural productivity, leading to a steady

¹⁷ Muscolino, Micah S. “Violence Against People and the Land”: 298.

¹⁸ Muscolino, Micah S. “Violence Against People and the Land”: 295.

¹⁹ Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. “Between War and Water: Farmer, City, and State in China’s Yellow River Flood of 1938–1947.” *Agricultural History* 90, no. 1 (2016): 98.

²⁰ Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. “Between War and Water: Farmer, City, and State in China’s Yellow River Flood of 1938–1947.” *Agricultural History* 90, no. 1 (2016): 100.

outflow of migrants, which perpetuated a cycle of refugee outflow as rural conditions grew worse.

The GMD government was now faced with the issue of how to manage the disaster resulting from flooding as well as what to do with a vast refugee population. Edgerton-Tarpley observes that the Nationalist government seized the opportunity created by the chaos of the Yellow River disaster to mobilize people toward its own state-building project. In order to accomplish these goals while also taking advantage of the massive labor potential of the refugee population, the GMD decided to recruit disaster victims as soldiers, dike builders, or settlers to produce crops to sustain themselves and the state during its war with Japan. These massive projects had a dramatic effect on the Chinese landscape, as tens of thousands of refugees were sent to develop the forested uplands of Shanxi and build new dikes in other Chinese controlled regions that were suffering from flooding. A common theme in the GMD's policies was its mobilization of refugees for the war effort. Although the GMD did see some success in its resettlement and dike construction campaigns, ultimately, both of these movements led to increased disillusionment among the refugee population. Mismanagement and lack of supplies meant that these policies often became more exploitive than helpful to the already devastated populations affected by flooding. Moreover, the GMD's inability to build functional water control infrastructure in flood zones, and the consistent prioritization of military needs over the needs of refugees, left disaster affected populations as hotbeds for Communist support after the war.

Although GMD policies for managing the needs of flood victims attempted to satisfy the needs of local people, the focus on the militarization of relief contributed to accelerating environmental degradation, which heavily influenced the disillusionment of refugees with the

GMD government. In the earlier years of the flooding crisis through the late 1930s and to the early 1940s, the GMD ordered a massive dike building campaign that utilized displaced people as labor to build dikes and polders. The scale of the project speaks to the “ambition and activism of the Nationalist state”, with the project drawing huge numbers of participants from flood regions to contribute to the rapid construction of new water management infrastructure.²¹ In one project in Fugou county, Henan, the GMD was able to muster a force of “30,000 local workers who moved 1.9 million cubic meters of earth in order to build a 48 kilometer section”.²² However, labor shortages due to emmigration from the area meant that many of those workers had to be imported from the areas that were not affected by flooding in Western Henan, the start of a trend of labor shortage that would only become more dire as floods continued to return.²³ The Nationalist government’s lack of resources was a major handicap in its campaign to construct dikes in the floodzone, with the loss of many of its most revenue rich territories like the lower Yangtze leading to a 45% decrease in its available revenue.²⁴ The result of this financial strain was that the workers who constructed the dikes “often received little to no pay”, and the already devastated riverine communities were forced to bear the brunt of the cost of materials used in the construction projects.

In addition to their inability to pay workers, widespread reports of dike failure at least partially due to government official’s mismanagement increasingly led people to view relief efforts as “unwelcome burdens”.²⁵ New dikes were often ineffective, with embankments “too low and thin”, and as a result floodwaters often breached the new dikes causing even more

²¹ Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. “Between War and Water: Farmer, City, and State in China’s Yellow River Flood of 1938–1947.” *Agricultural History* 90, no. 1 (2016): 109.

²² Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. “Between War and Water”: 109.

²³ Muscolino, Micah S. “Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China’s Henan Province, 1938-1945.” *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 299.

²⁴ Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. “Between War and Water”: 109.

²⁵ Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. “Between War and Water: Farmer, City, and State in China’s Yellow River Flood of 1938–1947.” *Agricultural History* 90, no. 1 (2016): 110.

destruction on the land they were supposed to be protecting. The problem of unreliable dikes was compounded by the incompetence of local officials who often waited until the last minute, just before the high water season, to start constructing flood resistance infrastructure. Foreign observers were often frustrated by the “criminal negligence of the Chinese officials”, who did nothing in seasons where local farmers were idle, and then called upon them when local labor was needed most, when it was time to harvest their winter crop.²⁶ These dikes, constructed hastily with “earth too soft to be of any use” in May, just before “floods would come down this year as last” sure enough lead to major breaches. In Fuguo county, floodwaters returned later in 1938 and again in 1939 as “Yellow River dikes broke”, after which hundreds of villagers abandoned their homes for good. One exasperated villager is reported to have cried that they “might as well run far away from that damn place and never come back”.²⁷ While the GMD struggled to build and maintain its dikes, Japanese propaganda in 1938 promised that the Yellow River dikes would be “will be repaired within a month” and that farmers in affected areas had “already been evacuated” before the worst of the flooding affected them.²⁸ Whether this propaganda was true or not, the GMD had totally failed to warn its civilian population of the danger of floodwaters and the high death toll that was a result, especially in flat areas without high ground to escape to, was seen as a result of the GMD’s negligence. The Nationalist government’s ineffective attempts to protect its citizens alienated flood victims and actually further damaged local hydraulic infrastructure. In the face of the initial terrific environmental disaster, the GMD may have actually exacerbated further environmental degradation as local

²⁶ Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. “Between War and Water”: 110.

²⁷ Muscolino, Micah S. “Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China’s Henan Province, 1938-1945.” *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 298.

²⁸ By Douglas RobertsonWireless to THE NEW YORK TIMES. 1938. "NORTH CHINA FLOOD SEEN FROM THE AIR: JAPANESE ANNOUNCEMENTS OF QUICK REPAIR ARE DOUBTED BY FOREIGN OBSERVERS BIG LOSS OF LIFE UNLIKELY WATERS SEEK 2 MAIN STREAMS, BUT HEAVY RAINS CAN CAUSE FRESH INUNDATION." *New York Times* (1923-), Jul 04, 8.

dikes, polders, and other infrastructure needed to manage water for agriculture continued to deteriorate, leaving the region vulnerable to famine.

And famine would eventually be the fate of millions of people living in Henan. Between 1942 to 1943, a series of extraordinary environmental pressures, including a drought and locust swarms, combined with man made pressures like war, extreme taxation policies, and the damage caused by the Yellow River flood would cause in the range of 3 million more deaths in Henan alone.²⁹ Data on weather patterns between 1942 and 1943 indicate that Henan suffered extreme drought and heat wave conditions, with “the temperature averaging two to three degrees above average and rainfall was less than half the average.”³⁰ This alone would be sufficient to cause food insecurity among the poorer peasants of Henan, however the flood zone also proved to be a breeding ground for locusts that consumed another half of autumn and spring crops.³¹ Despite the approximately 40% drop in Henan’s crop yield,³² the Nationalist government decided not to provide relief in terms of grain tax remissions or to release grain stored in neighboring regions that had a surplus of warehoused grain.³³ From the GMD leadership’s perspective, “defending the nation was one and the same as protecting the people’s livelihood”,³⁴ and since it was not in the interests of the war effort to send valuable and limited food resources to a contested province, Henan was to receive no help from the Chinese government.

Moreover, while regular taxes continued to be extracted, Henan and other contested provinces were also forced to supply local GMD troops amid Nationalist propaganda calling

²⁹ Garnaut, Anthony. “A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942.” *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 6 (2013): 2009.

³⁰ Garnaut, Anthony. “A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942.”: 2020.

³¹ Muscolino, Micah S. “Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China’s Henan Province, 1938-1945.” *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 301.

³² Garnaut, Anthony. “A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942.”: 2023.

³³ Garnaut, Anthony. “A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942.”: 2044

³⁴ Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn Jean. “From ‘Nourish the People’ to ‘Sacrifice for the Nation’: Changing Responses to Disaster in Late Imperial and Modern China.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 2 (2014): 458.

disaster victims to sacrifice for their country.³⁵ The hypocrisy of this rationale was readily apparent to *Time* reporter Theodore White, who wrote that while dogs ate human bodies by roads and parents cannibalized their own children, he was treated to a feast: “We had two soups. We had spiced lotus, peppered chicken, beef and water chestnut. We had spring rolls, hot wheat buns, rice, bean-curd, chicken and fish. We had three cakes with sugar frosting.”³⁶ The grim circumstances that gripped rural Henan were reported by local gazettes as follows: “no rain for three months... crops withered... total harvest failure for black beans and soybeans... the people eat grass roots and bark; sons and daughters being sold”.³⁷ The irony of the GMD’s “sacrifice for the country” rhetoric is apparent as the government prioritized feeding its officers enough to provide a foreign journalist a banquet, while refusing to provide sufficient relief to civilians who starved and died in droves. And although famine was most widely reported in Henan, other provinces in China also suffered from deadly famines during this time as well. In University of Melbourne history professor Anthony Garnaut’s *A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942*, he uses demographic data of the reduction of the population cohort during the famine years versus the population cohort after to determine which areas were hardest hit. From this data, it is likely that other than just Henan, Southern Shanxi and Southern Hebei were also particularly affected by famine, and likely due to the same conditions.

The famine that affected much of Northern China represented a massive failure for the GMD’s relief policies, and highlights how it prioritized military/strategic priorities over the wellbeing and, in this case, survival of its citizens. Many historians believe that the Nationalist’s general apathy towards its own citizens in their time of greatest need severely damaged morale,

³⁵ Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. “Between War and Water: Farmer, City, and State in China’s Yellow River Flood of 1938–1947.” *Agricultural History* 90, no. 1 (2016): 107.

³⁶ White, Theodore. “Until the Harvest Is Reaped.” *Time*, March 22, 1943.
<https://time.com/archive/6598465/until-the-harvest-is-reaped/>.

³⁷ Garnaut, Anthony. “A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942.” *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 6 (2013): 2017.

as people increasingly questioned the legitimacy of the GMD regime. As a disillusioned local labor force dwindled under the pressures of successive crises, provincial governments turned to increasingly coercive measures in order to recruit people into unpaid labor maintaining dikes. Massive dike failures in 1943 flooded 1.3 million *mu* of land, destroying the crop that famine stricken Henan desperately needed.³⁸ In order to plug the dikes the central government turned to conscription, pressing farmers from nearby areas into work, further exhausting “Henan’s already struggling rural population”.³⁹ Still in the midst of a famine, the dike repairs interrupted local farmers during their harvest season and prevented them from sowing new seeds for the autumn crop.⁴⁰ Farmers who resisted conscription were arrested, and conscripts that fled were shot. Government quotas meant that each village was required to provide a certain number of people to help build dikes, in some places, the volume of people called upon in a quota outweighed the total number of people still living in the village. For starving and physically exhausted peasants, the demands of the hard labor often proved fatal.

Many farmers began seeing their own national government as no better than the Japanese invaders, with some farmers in Anhui deciding to trade with Japanese-controlled areas in order to access grain and salt. Local newspapers complained that the impoverishment caused as a result of repeated floods severely diminished the ability for the local people to resist the Japanese, after all, “without food to eat, what use are guns?”⁴¹ Meanwhile, the tone deaf leadership of the GMD continued to insist on the success of its scorched earth strategy, with Chiang Kaishek’s wife, Soong Meiling crediting the destruction of “all food and fuel, and even

³⁸ Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. “Between War and Water: Farmer, City, and State in China’s Yellow River Flood of 1938–1947.” *Agricultural History* 90, no. 1 (2016): 111.

³⁹ Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. “Between War and Water: 111.

⁴⁰ Muscolino, Micah S. “Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China’s Henan Province, 1938–1945.” *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 301.

⁴¹ Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. “Between War and Water: Farmer, City, and State in China’s Yellow River Flood of 1938–1947.” *Agricultural History* 90, no. 1 (2016): 111.

rice bowls” in 1942 to China’s successful resistance against the Japanese.⁴² In a broadcast on *India Day*, she reportedly advised that “what China has done, India can do” in their own fight against Japan. Ironically, and at around the same time, British controlled Bengal was also suffering a devastating famine of a similar magnitude as the one in Northern China.

While the GMD’s local relief policies generally amounted to failure, other tactics that were used by the central government to relieve refugees were quite successful. Starting as early as 1938, the GMD began sending refugees fleeing from eastern China to settle undeveloped land on land that was more secure from Japanese attacks. The most successful example of this was in the settlement of Huanglongshan in Shanxi, where between 1938 to 1944, 50,000 people were settled reclaiming 331,000 *mu* of land, and harvesting 760,000 piculs of grain.⁴³ Total land reclamation initiatives in Nationalist and Communist controlled Shanxi totalled to 3.9 million *mu* of land reclaimed, with up to 83 percent of that land being reclaimed reportedly developed by refugees.⁴⁴ While problems of land degradation, disparities in quality of life between different segments of the refugee population, and disease were endemic in these communities, it is undeniable that these efforts were successful. Resettlement did not only give refugees a means to provide for themselves, but also to supply the war time government with tax revenue. However, these relief efforts also had the unintended side effect of drawing even more manpower away from the labor intensive maintenance of the region's water management infrastructure. Muscolino claims that the incentivization for refugees from Henan to flee into Shanxi “contributed to a total disruption of Henan’s hydraulic agriculture system”, as a smaller

⁴² "CHINA'S SCORCHED EARTH POLICY" *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957) 19 March 1942: 1.

⁴³ Muscolino, Micah S. “Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China’s Henan Province, 1938-1945.” *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 304.

⁴⁴ Muscolino, Micah S. “Violence Against People and the Land”: 304.

population was forced to bear total responsibility for the upkeep of dikes.⁴⁵ The desperate struggle to maintain dikes in Henan in 1942 and 1943, characterized by local governments being forced to coerce a smaller population into the massive task of dike repair, was partially the result of the GMD drawing off people to resettle elsewhere.

At all turns, the GMD's efforts to manage the disaster of its own creation resulted in increased environmental degradation in flood affected areas and disillusioned the people the government was supposed to be serving. From the central government's initial relief efforts of the inundated areas, widespread failure of local officials to properly implement dike construction policies led to frequent breaches, which in turn required even more labor to repair. The failure of the central government to properly manage the floodwaters led to a continual erosion of local hydraulic infrastructure that rural communities relied on for agriculture, which simultaneously diminished the agricultural output of the entire region. Environmental degradation begot emigration, with the resulting population reduction putting more strain on the exhausted local labor force, begetting more environmental degradation, begetting more emigration in a vicious cycle. By 1942, the strain on Henan reached a breaking point, with the effects of war and flooding already diminishing the capacity for people to grow food being compounded by crop failures due to locust swarms and drought. Despite the GMD having the means to mitigate the disaster by reducing grain taxes and sending stored grain from other provinces into struggling Henan, strategic concerns outweighed the GMD's concern for its own people, leading to a catastrophic famine. Even while millions of people in Henan starved to death, GMD leadership continued to call for people to sacrifice for the nation, for the war effort, while desperate farmers watched Nationalist officers feasting on cakes and pastries. From the perspective of local people,

⁴⁵ Muscolino, Micah S. "Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China's Henan Province, 1938-1945." *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 294.

the GMD was often just as bad as the invading Japanese, as its comprehensive failure to support the struggling communities in flood affected areas contributed to the sweeping victory of the communists during the Chinese civil war. In the GMD's draconian measures to win the war, it lost its people.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Associated Press. 1938. "China Floods Kill 150,000; 30 Millions Flee to West: Thousands of Japanese Troops are Feared Trapped, Drowned. Chiang Revising His Government Natives, Invaders Trade Accusations of Cutting River Dikes. China's-Sorrows. Floods Kill Thousands. Flood Kills 150,000 Chinese; Japanese Fear for Soldiers China." *The Washington Post* (1923-1954), Jun 15, 2.
<https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/china-floods-kill-150-000-30-millions-flee-west/docview/151082823/se-2>.

British Pathé. *Japan Advances on Hankou*. Newsreel. London: British Pathé, 1938.
<https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/168716/>.

"China's Scorched Earth Policy" *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957) 19 March 1942: 1.
 Web. 8 Dec 2025 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article8238043>>.

"China's Vast Flood Threatens to Unite Hwang Ho and Yangtze." *The Science News-Letter* 34, no. 1 (1938): 5-6. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3914559>.

Douglas Robertson Special Cable to THE NEW YORK TIMES. 1938. "CHINA FLOODS RUIN VAST FARM LANDS: YELLOW RIVER COVERS FERTILE AREA WITH SAND-WAL-OF WATER RUSHES SOUTH JAPANESE INCREASE FORCES DEATH ESTIMATE IS REDUCED CHINA FLOODS RUIN VAST FARM LANDS CHINESE CLAIM AN AIR VICTORY FLOODING OF HANKOW EXPECTED." *New York Times* (1923-), Jun 16, 1.
<https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/china-floods-ruin-vast-farm-lands/docview/102590252/se-2>.

Douglas Robertson Wireless to THE NEW YORK TIMES. 1938. "NORTH CHINA FLOOD SEEN FROM THE AIR: JAPANESE ANNOUNCEMENTS OF QUICK REPAIR ARE DOUBTED BY FOREIGN OBSERVERS BIG LOSS OF LIFE UNLIKELY WATERS SEEK 2 MAIN STREAMS, BUT HEAVY RAINS CAN CAUSE FRESH INUNDATION." *New York Times* (1923-), Jul 04, 8.
<https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/north-china-flood-seen-air/docview/102527754/se-2>.

"Flood may be Worst in History, Says River Expert: Yellow River Attains Highest Level in Early August YANGTSE FLOOD FEARS CROWING Inundation Expected if Huangho Waters Join River." 1938. *The China Press* (1925-1938), Jun 19, 1.
<https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/flood-may-be-worst-history-says-river-expert/docview/1416599555/se-2>.

"Honan Relief Body Surveying Hwanwho Break: Worker Says Money Needed to Carry on Functions HELP URGED FOR 800,000 PEOPLE Finds 3,000 Sq. Miles Affected by Flood Condition." 1938. *The China Press (1925-1938)*, Nov 21, 5.
<https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/honan-relief-body-surveying-hwanwho-break/docview/1416603803/se-2>.

"Tokyo Thought Concerned Over War Prospects: Paris Papers Stress Japan's Troubles in China FLOOD SAID THREAT TO NIPPON ARMIES 'War to be very Long, very Difficult, very Costly'." 1938. *The China Press (1925-1938)*, Jun 25, 4.
<https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/tokyo-thought-concerned-over-war-prospects/docview/1425491522/se-2>.

White, Theodore. "Until the Harvest Is Reaped." *Time*, March 22, 1943.
<https://time.com/archive/6598465/until-the-harvest-is-reaped/>.

Secondary Sources

Garnaut, Anthony. "A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942." *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 6 (2013): 2007–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24494213>.

Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. "Between War and Water: Farmer, City, and State in China's Yellow River Flood of 1938–1947." *Agricultural History* 90, no. 1 (2016): 94–116.
<http://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2016.090.1.94>.

Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn Jean. "From 'Nourish the People' to 'Sacrifice for the Nation': Changing Responses to Disaster in Late Imperial and Modern China." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 2 (2014): 447–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43553296>.

Lary, Diana. "Defeat and Retreat: 1938." Chapter. In *The Chinese People at War: Human Suffering and Social Transformation, 1937–1945*, 44–77. New Approaches to Asian History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Lary, Diana. "Drowned Earth: The Strategic Breaching of the Yellow River Dyke, 1938." *War in History* 8, no. 2 (2001): 191–207. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26013859>.

Muscolino, Micah S. "Violence Against People and the Land: The Environment and Refugee Migration from China's Henan Province, 1938-1945." *Environment and History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 291–311. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41303510>.

Muscolino, Micah S. "Refugees, Land Reclamation, and Militarized Landscapes in Wartime China: Huanglongshan, Shaanxi, 1937-45." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 2 (2010): 453–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20721849>.

