

RED FLAG CANAL: WISE OR FOOLISH?

RED FLAG CANAL (40 minute; 1970)

The five Youtube clips begin here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Klw34e-9tgQ>

The film tells the story of the The Red Flag Canal, built by an impoverished village in Henan province, bordering Shanxi, was started late in the Great Leap Forward of the 1950s and finished in 1965. The project brought water through a mountain in forty two channels. Local leaders organized labor teams, not machines, and local planning, not state funding. Therefore it represents Mao's "do it yourself" *zili gengsheng* strategy to harness nature, building China from the village up, not from the capital down, and depending on local initiative, not professionals or bureaucrats. The 1970 film reflects the strengths of the Cultural Revolution, not its excesses and mistakes. The scenery and the faces of the villagers in the film are very much the same as those in the early Fifth Generation films such as *Yellow Earth*.

OUTSIDE READINGS

- "[Red Flag Canal](#)" (Wikipedia)
- [Red Flag Canal](#) (posters on Stephan Landsberger's Chinese Posters website).

QUESTIONS

The film, the excerpt from Mao, and the four following pieces each tell a different story about the Red Flag Canal.

- How does the film present the problem and how did the canal solve it? Who gets the credit? How does the film make its argument visually? Do you need an English translation to understand the story?
- What are Mao's objectives in telling the short fable? What was the application in the Cultural Revolution to making it prominent again?
- The two following pieces take much the same view as the film. What arguments do they and the film make for the success of the canal? Are they the same arguments as each other? What authorities do they invoke? What do they offer as proof?
- David Davies in the third piece reports a changed situation and a different view. What has changed and why does he see things differently? What does he point to as evidence? Who are his authorities? How is his tone different?
- The last piece, by Michael Buckley, is from his website promoting a film on the environmental catastrophe in Tibet. What is the underlying story he accepts when he views the Red Flag Canal as a failure? How is his "story" different from Mao's story of the revolution?
- Who are the people portrayed in the film and the articles? Men? Women? Old? Children? Officials? Do they play different roles in the film? In the articles?
- What is the tone and style of each piece? What is the audience?
- Can you make arguments both for and against Red Flag Canal as a heroic piece of work?

THE FOOLISH OLD MAN WHO REMOVED THE MOUNTAINS

Mao Zedong

In 1945, before the Communists came to power, Mao Zedong addressed a Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Many party members were discouraged because the enemy had more weapons and money. Mao encouraged them with this argument and this story.

Our aim in propagating the line of the congress is to build up the confidence of the whole Party and the entire people in the certain triumph of the revolution. We must first raise the political consciousness of the vanguard so that, resolute and unafraid of sacrifice, they will surmount every difficulty to win victory. But this is not enough; we must also arouse the political consciousness of the entire people so that they may willingly and gladly fight together with us for victory. We should fire the whole people with the conviction that China belongs not to the reactionaries but to the Chinese people.

There is an ancient Chinese fable called “The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains.” It tells of an old man who lived in northern China long, long ago and was known as the Foolish Old Man of North Mountain. His house faced south and beyond his doorway stood the two great peaks, Taihang and Wangwu,¹ obstructing the way. He called his sons, and hoe in hand they began to dig up these mountains with great determination.

Another graybeard, known as the Wise Old Man, saw them and said derisively, “How silly of you to do this! It is quite impossible for you few to dig up those two huge mountains.” The Foolish Old Man replied, “When I die, my sons will carry on; when they die, there will be my grandsons, and then their sons and grandsons, and so on to infinity. High as they are, the mountains cannot grow any higher and with every bit we dig, they will be that much lower. Why can't we clear them away?” Having refuted the Wise Old Man's wrong view, he went on digging every day, unshaken in his conviction. God was moved by this, and he sent down two angels, who carried the mountains away on their backs.

Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?

In 1965, Mao felt that his revolution had decayed into bureaucracy and that so-called “experts” had denied the initiative of the people in much the same way that the Wise Old Man denied the initiative of the Foolish Old Man. The Little Red Book, the selection of Mao's thoughts which circulated in millions of copies, included this fable. Mao and his supporters saw The Red Flag Canal as carrying on the spirit of the Foolish Old Man who turned out to be the wise one by relying on the people.

¹These mountains were not far from Lin County, in the classic heart of China's ancient civilization.

RED FLAG CANAL- THE TOTEM OF CHINA

This recent report (2009) from a semi-official website summarizes the appeal of the project without mentioning problems or changing political climate.

On the road to Lin County, there is a big sign reading 'Welcome to the Hometown of the Red Flag Canal'. In the streets, the products labeled with 'Red Flag Canal' can be seen everywhere, from liquors to smoke. The name of the Red Flag Canal has been closely connected with Lin County. Locally, the Red Flag Canal is also called the canal of life or the canal with happiness.

It is August now. The weather is pleasant. Along the way, Tanghang Mountain extends long and wide, and was all covered with green trees. The Red Flag Canal then has become a scenic spot, welcoming tourists all over the country. The ticket is 61 yuan. At the village of Zhenshuihe of Yao village, some fish pond and fruit forest built by local villagers can still be seen. According to villager Sang Huanrong, when there was no Red Flag Canal a few decades ago, it was a naked mountain. Villagers had to carry water from places far away. Raising a fish pond was just unpractical....

The Linzhou is in ... a mountainous area with droughts in almost all seasons. Lin County [history records] about 100 natural disasters, 30 droughts and man-eating phenomenon between 1436 and 1949.... The bodies were piled like a hill. In all, the matter of water bewildered the 100, 000 people in Lin County.

In the 1950s, Lin County acted to the call of the government to facilitate water conservancy projects. There were a few reservoirs built later on. However, at the end of 1956, a big drought happened here. It was rainless, and the reservoirs lacked water and became empty.

The only method was to find water from outside. Yang Gui was the county mayor at that time. Under his leadership, the committee put forward a crazy idea, even to nowadays people – that was to build a river on the rock purely by manpower, to draw the water to the county from Zhanghe River.

The canal was indeed a miracle to everyone at that time. The main canal was 70.6 kilometers. From the starting point in Shanxi province to the end in Lin County, there was only 8.8 m fall in altitude. If there were any mistake, the canal, with such a long distance, would fail to draw water to the county. In addition, there were hardly tools or machines to help dig the hard rock stones of the Taihang Mountain....

During a decade, people in Lin County worked extremely hard to build the Canal. It was really a challenge. And once, rocks fell down during the construction, but villagers didn't withdraw. The water was drawn into the canal on April 5, 1965. And three months later, the whole project was completed. If the stones dug from the canal were put together into a wall of 2 m long and 3 m wide, it could connect Guangzhou and Harbin.

In the 70s, Premier [Zhou Enlai] said to international friends proudly, 'there are two miracles in China, one is the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge, and the other is the Red Flag Canal in Lin County.'

The canal has improved the living conditions of people in Lin County. They received a great harvest. The plowland could yield 50 kilograms of crop originally, but now it is about 10 times of that. And villagers started to plan their own fish pond and fruits.

The canal has even brought more changes. It is set as an example for the rest of the country, and attracted many overseas experts to visit. To date, the brand of the Red Flag Canal has generated great commercial values, such as liquors and cigarettes. ...

The spirit of that time, hard work and struggle, has been built as a totem for the county and the whole country.

(Xinhua News Agency; October 2, 2004, no original date given) http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200410/02/eng20041002_158930.html

SENIOR PARTY OFFICIAL VISITS “RED FLAG CANAL SPIRIT” DISPLAY

Li Changchun, member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, paid a visit to the display of the “red flag canal spirit” in Beijing Thursday afternoon.

The red flag canal is a large irrigation project constructed in the 1960s by the people of Linzhou, central China's Henan Province, after ten years' efforts.

Measuring 1,500 kilometers along the steep slopes of the Taihang Mountains, it is considered a miracle in China's architectural history.

The display of the “red flag canal spirit” reproduces the courage and toughness of the builders through a number of pictures and objects.

Accompanied by Liu Yunshan, head of the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, Li carefully watched the exhibits and listened to the commentary.

Li said the “red flag canal spirit” featuring self-reliance, hard work, solidarity

and cooperation, and unselfish devotion, is the vivid incarnation of Chinese characters and is the precious spiritual treasure of the country.

The spirit is still of great importance today when China's is building a well-off society in an all-round way, said the official.

China is now at the primary stage of socialism, and the socialist modernization will only be achieved after arduous efforts of many generations.

Li said the “red flag canal spirit” should be closely combined with today's situation, so that it will become a strong spiritual power to encourage cadres and the public in the socialist construction.

Li said the display was very meaningful, adding that it is an effective way to educate the people, especially the youth.

More high school and college students should be organized to visit the display so as to remember and pass on the precious spirit, said Li.

FINDING RED FLAG CANAL (Excerpts)

David Davies

Davies is a traveler with experience in China, but not a specialist in economics or politics. But here he gives a sharp eyed report on what he saw and heard on his visit in 2010

While in China last month I found myself with a bit of extra time and thought I would visit the canal to see it for myself. It is located near contemporary Linzhou, Henan and is most easily reached from Anyang, which is about four hours by express train from Beijing. I had initially hoped to join a Chinese tour group leaving Anyang, but there were no groups departing the weekend that I was in town. At the suggestion of the local branch of CITS, I cut a deal with a local taxi driver for a day and had him drive me out to the canal and surrounding areas.

From Revolutionary to Entrepreneurial

The Red Flag Canal Museum has the familiar 1960's Communist-era architecture, slogans and design that suggests it once received—or had planned on receiving—many more tourists than it currently does. At the same time, however, the healthy amount of souvenirs for sale in the parking lot and the sights and sounds of fresh renovation suggests it is still a reasonably busy destination even in 21st century China. Indeed, as I walked into the museum I was surprised to see quite a few groups of middle-aged tourists chatting excitedly and snapping photos. The museum is built alongside a large branch of the canal at a point where it is diverted into smaller canals—so visitors move alongside and cross over the canal while visiting the museum.

When it was built in the late 1960's the museum was intended to communicate the history of the canal's construction to commemorate and propagate its "revolutionary spirit" across the generations. It is a spirit of "self-reliance and arduous struggle" that depends on collective action for collective gain. The museum tells the story beginning with the pre-canal conditions in the region around Linzhou, previously called Linxian. The area was dry with unpredictable rainfall and frequent droughts that brought suffering to local people. The construction of the canal was intended to take water from the Chang River and divert it though the Taihang Mountains....

During his visit [President Jiang Zemin] presented his own gift of calligraphy ... with an interesting twist that says much more about the attempt to rewrite the canal's meanings. Replacing Mao's emphasis on "self reliance and arduous struggle, Jiang wrote, "Develop the Red Flag Canal's Spirit of Self-Reliance and Arduous Undertaking!" Replacing "struggle" *fendou* with a different word, *chuangye*. While the word might be loosely translated as "undertaking" or "business"... the term is more commonly used these days to describe "entrepreneurial activity"—by a person, for example, who creates something of value from nothing—a "startup". By replacing one character Jiang appears to have made a symbolic attempt to push the meaning of the Red Flag Canal away from collective struggle toward more individual creativity....

Where Mao was the foundational inspiration for the masses who, we are told in the older section of the museum, relied on themselves to build the canal. In the updated sections of the museum visitors are reminded numerous times that it was the party who provided the organization for the locals to create the canal. In fact, it was only within the safe confines of party leadership that the locals could successfully engage in their entrepreneurial activity....

Try the Proletarian Hammer and Leave a Smoke For Mao

At the conclusion of the walking route, just before I heading down the mountainside to the parking area where I planned to meet the driver, I passed a group of local women dressed-up as a women's brigade straight out of the "classic" Red Flag Canal film. Complete with woven rattan hats and period clothing, they hammered steel bars like the film depicted. Visitors gasped at the women demonstrating the way the hammers and steel bars were used to drill holes in the rock, and found the crude tools funny. The actors were happy to take photos with tourists and welcomed visitors to try welding the their proletarian hammers. It was an opportunity for tourists to play-act being a worker on the Red Flag canal. Of course, like others I could not miss an opportunity to re-enact a scene from the film—so I gave it a try.

Mao's FootPrint

Michael Buckley

Revolutionary Red China or revolutionary Green China—which is the way forward?

The Mao Zedong mentality from the 1950s is that Mother Nature can (and should) be defeated and overcome—and that Red China will surely achieve this. The slogan 'Humans must conquer nature' was widespread under Chairman Mao. Mao's arrogant legacy lingers today with the leadership of the military-industrial-complex that rules China. Over 60 percent of China's current leaders have engineering backgrounds—and vested interests in large engineering companies that need mega-projects to keep going.

There is a contrary viewpoint being spearheaded by the educated elite of Chinese society. This viewpoint is that trying to take on Mother Nature can lead to disaster. This is a Green China movement...

Red Flag Canal

In the early days of the Mao era, taking on Mother Nature had mixed results.... The Great Sparrow Campaign, initiated by Mao Zedong in the late 1950s, was launched because sparrows ate grain seeds and were thought to be detrimental to agriculture. It was decided that all peasants in China would bang pots and pans and run around to make sparrows fly away in fear. Sparrows were killed with slingshots, nests were destroyed, nestlings were killed.... With no sparrows to eat them,

the locust population ballooned, swarming the country and compounding the problems already caused by the Great Leap Forward....

But on to the engineering experiments. At the height of Maoist revolutionary fervour in the 1960s, a colossal project called Red Flag Canal was launched by peasants using the most rudimentary of tools. Between 1960 and 1969, more than 100,000 'volunteer' labourers tunnelled through hundreds of kilometres of mountain to divert drinking water from Shanxi province to the parched valleys of Lin County in northern Henan province. This was touted by Mao's propaganda people as a marvel of engineering, and is still held up by the Party as a patriotic model of the Communist spirit.

Red Flag Canal has not fared well with the passage of time. Today, it is little more than a tourist attraction: the water level has dropped as the source river dwindles, much of Lin County has dried up again, and upstream pollution makes the water unpotable. There are bitter disputes between Lin County farmers and those upstream who had their water stolen through diversion (and who now receive compensation from the Lin County government)...