Abstract

China’s South-North Water Diversion Scheme is intended to improve North China’s water resources by channelling water from the Yangzi to the Yellow River basin along three routes, two of which are currently under construction. The third is planned to be established by 2050. Although recent official rhetoric stresses a ‘harmonious coexistence of mankind with nature’, the official water diversion project entails a large-scale transformation of nature by human hands. However, governmental institutions legitimise the project as an inevitable step in the securing of China’s sustainable development.

Drawing mainly on official media sources and scientific and political materials on water diversion in China, this paper analyses the underlying discursive thought patterns that legitimise the official, i.e. political and scientific elites’ drive to dominate nature. It reveals how appeals to ‘traditional’ Chinese knowledge are used and deployed within the debate in order to strengthen normative approaches and thereby official and institutional power. Despite official rhetoric conjuring up the ‘harmonious coexistence of mankind with nature’, the ‘modernist’ idea of ‘dominating nature’ is expressed in the governmental representatives’ actions and their mind set. Based on the South-North Water Diversion Scheme as a case study, I argue that the slogan ‘harmonious coexistence of mankind with nature’ is only understandable as an expression of the government’s drive to dominate nature. It can be understood as the most recent incarnation of an old ideal, adapted to the requirements of the present discourses within China, and across the globe, on the relationship between mankind and nature. The slogan of ‘harmonious coexistence’ functions as a means to redefine modernity in order to achieve a powerful position in the ‘modern’ globalised world.

1. Introduction

Officially, the slogan ‘harmonious coexistence of mankind with nature’ (ren yu ziran hexie xiangchu)¹ is part of the Chinese government’s strategy to build a ‘socialist harmonious society’ (shehui zhuyi hexie shehui), which

¹ The slogan of a ‘harmonious coexistence of mankind with nature’ and its shortened version ‘harmonious coexistence’ are used interchangeably in this paper.
has been approved in October 2006 at the Sixth Plenum of the 16th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee under the guidance of the Hu Jintao administration.² Contrary to Maoist ideas of struggling against nature,³ the slogan of ‘harmonious coexistence’ redefines the officially desired mankind-nature relationship as a harmonious one. Even though (or perhaps because) this signifies a paradigmatic shift in the official perception of the mankind-nature relationship, ‘traditional’ Chinese ideas are called upon to create a sense of continuity. In the face of grave environmental challenges in China, the slogan expresses the government’s awareness of the need to create a new environmental consciousness among the people.

In this paper, I will analyse the slogan of ‘harmonious coexistence of mankind with nature’ on the basis of the South-North Water Diversion Project (nanshui beidiao gongcheng, henceforth SNWDP) as a case study. The project is in the process of construction today and is meant to improve North China’s water resources through the artificial delivery of additional water from South China. Due to its scale and scope the project can only be understood as a venture that fundamentally transforms nature and subjects it to human control. However, it is depicted as rebuilding the ‘harmonious coexistence of mankind with nature’, a concept that seemingly aims to re-establish a balance, which has been disturbed by actions inspired by ‘modernist’ ideas about dominating nature.⁴ This observation reveals the


³ Shapiro, Judith, Mao’s War Against Nature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. 1–19. In this volume Shapiro deals with the topic of ‘struggling against nature’ in the Mao era, i.e. the 1950s–1970s.

⁴ Instead of sticking to the most accepted version of modernity, defined as the antithesis of nature or the dichotomy of nature and culture, I would rather stress Julia Thomas’s “cosmopolitical version of modernity”; cf. Thomas, Julia A., Reconfiguring Modernity: Concepts of Nature in Japanese Political Ideology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 218–19. Based on Latour’s claim that We Have Never Been Modern, cosmopolitical means the interweaving of cosmos/nature and polis/culture; cf. Latour, Bruno, Wir sind nie modern gewesen: Versuch einer symmetrischen Anthropologie (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1995). Rather than posing “‘the’ Western view of nature against ‘the’ Japanese [or ‘the’ Chinese, ‘the’ Eastern, etc.] view”, a cosmopolitical version of modernity is “anti-essential-