

Abolishing the Reservoir Myth

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Recently drought has been looming in southern Taiwan. An anti-drought meeting, equivalent to a national security scale gathering, chaired by President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and participated by ministers from related ministries and departments, was held on December 19th, 2009, showing that the authorities highly emphasize the water scarcity problem and recognize that the prolonged drought is a national security crisis. However, more and more proposals for establishing reservoirs appeared recently, even the postponed Meinung (美濃) reservoir plan a decade ago is proposed again. I worry such irrational proposal will appear in the coming anti-drought meeting chaired by President Ma. Taiwan's developmentism logic of "building reservoirs to cure water scarcity" originates from the 1950s when Shihmen (石門) Reservoir, the biggest Dam in Taiwan, was collaboratively built by American experts and Taiwanese technocrats. Thus far there are 84 reservoirs in Taiwan and the total reserved water volume reaches 4 billion tons, of which 2.5 billion is provided for irrigation and industrial consumption. Until today, once drought is looming in Taiwan, industrial water supply is always the first priority, creating tension for the people's livelihood and agriculture water supply. I say that the developmentism logic can make water reservoirs of no help to solve Taiwan's water supply problem.



Why? Firstly, water resource policy under developmentism disarms community members' self-defense power. Moreover, knowledge reproduction such as the rigid legacy of reservoir knowledge system in universities' engineering disciplines results in violence towards rivers. The sad destiny of Taiwan's rivers is: a dam blocks the upstream, pollutions permeate the midstream and downstream and cement walls are established along the banks of these segments, interest groups mine sands recklessly and deprive the rivers of their vitality, making them lose their life nourishment and rehabilitation capability.

The real problem of Taiwan's water resource does not lie in reservoir but lacking of sustainable exploitation concept. Having been dominated by developmentism for many years, a few problems have become apparent: firstly, water resource knowledge is alienated from local residents' lives; secondly, the construction and transmission of water resource knowledge are primarily based on the interests of metropolitan and industrial capitalists; thirdly, the transmission of water resource knowledge is monopolized by an economy and engineering driven educational system. The current institutionalized education has become in practice a closed system where the majority of people are expelled from participating in water resource knowledge, making education a mechanism to transport resources to the elites of the society.



During the 1990s, the citizens' society in southern Taiwan has contributed substantially to seeking alternative water resource development logic. The



environmental groups and alternative water resource promoting organizations connected the power of local governments, schools, bird watching societies, public opinion representatives, community power, and media, etc., to draw attention to issues such as eco-survey, sand mining problem, reflection on high water and energy consuming petrochemical industries, river pollution management, water resource allocation and wetland conservation, etc.

The contributions of southern Taiwan's alternative water resource movement are: firstly, establishment of a sustainable development network; secondly, inspection on the government's river and forest conservation affairs; thirdly, proposing an alternative water resource management plan; fourthly, facilitating a bottom-up decision making process by designating Gaoping (高屏) River, Erhjen (二仁) River, Jiangjiun (將軍) River, and Donggang (東港) River as main southern Taiwan rivers to start dredging affairs. They also facilitated establishment of the policy on requiring distances between animal wastes and Gaoping River source and establishment of the Gaoping River Management Bureau.

In practice, the southern Taiwan alternative water resource movement has stridden into post-developmentism water resource management. What does “post-developmentism” mean? To borrow the words from Serge Latouche, Emeritus Professor of Economics at the University of Paris-Sud, that a post-developmentism society intends to build a harmonies, self-sufficient and economical society. In exact terms, its ultimate goal is “zero growth,” not “de-growth,” meaning breaking the imperative of economic growth and relentlessly deconstructing and criticizing the development entities. The post-developmentism can alleviate us from modern doctrine of economic growth and propose an alternative society blueprint.

Taiwan's post-developmentism water management should firstly re-assess the large reservoirs in plan or under construction and terminate large reservoir construction which will devastate the ancient mountain and forests. Secondly, we should re-think over the water management policy which allows industrial and metropolitan water consumption deprive agriculture and rural water supply. Thirdly, we should stop pushing forward all river cementation management constructions to let the rivers return to nature's self-management, and lastly, we should let the community to regain the decision making right to protect the rivers. Taiwan's future water policy should not be a wrestling arena of political reward or commercial interest, but should return to people's livelihood politics, establishing a coherent and trustworthy public network to achieve rational water resource allocation and sustainable development.

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