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## Henan Floods 2021 and China's Narrative Creation

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Disasters have had a long tumultuous relationship with China, be they natural or humanmade. Of late the line between natural and humanmade disasters has been blurring with examples ranging from the outbreak of Coronavirus in 2019 which still plagues the world; to the floods in Henan this year. In all these cases, because of the ways in which the leadership handles the crises, the common people continue being the sufferers. Yet, to change the discourse around human suffering caused by humanmade causes, China uses its own narrative to present a different picture.

Flooding is not new in China as it sees severe flooding every year, causing massive damages to life and property. The 1931 Yangtze Huai River floods which hit Whuan, Nanjing and beyond left 150,000 dead, while the more recent floods in 2017 affected more than 10 provinces and 14 million people. However, with the passage of time, because of climate change along with rapid urbanisation which is fueled by China's appetite for infrastructure creation, the impacts have only become more severe.

In China's central Henan province, as of July 23, 25 people have died due to massive downpour, as the province witnesses the heaviest rainfall in a thousand years. Several cities have been inundated, as horrifying visuals of people stranded in subway stations with neck deep water among a host of other bone chilling videos go viral across the internet. Xinhua news agency [reported](#) direct economic losses of 1.22 billion yuan or USD 189 billion till July 22.

A widely shared WeChat article pointed out the early contradictory statements from the local state media, which stated that no passenger was at danger, while footage which has later been blocked from China's internet was [shared](#) of dead bodies at Shakoulu station. Premature declarations were made that the rescue mission was complete, while suffering passengers, trapped in neck deep waters from inside the subway posted about their predicament. Most of the deaths of the people on the submerged subway was due to oxygen deprivation. Power was shut to prevent electricity from leaking into water. Without power supplies, the ventilation system shut down and the tunnel continued getting flooded while oxygen ran out. In Zhengzhou city, subway lines and flights had to be suspended as flood water inundated the city of 13 million. While state run Global Times keeps trying to drive attention from the central fact that extensive dam construction has led to the flood by laying the blame only on climate change, the fact remains that China's massive dam construction has led to disruptions in waterways that [cause clogging](#). To begin with Zhengzhou at least is a flood plain and urban planning should have heeded this fact, but clearly that has not been the case. Zhengzhou is situated just south of the Yellow River. It is one of China's "[sponge cities](#)", designed to cope with 180- 200 milliliters of rainfall over 24

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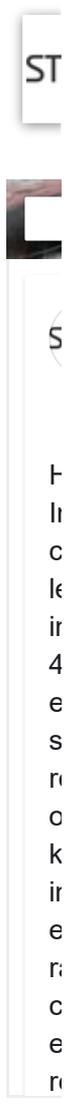
hours. However, the downpour this time was much more than the imagined 200 milliliters.

What is also worrisome is the ways in which different departments and leadership at different levels respond to the crisis. To begin with, the timings of warnings from the local meteorological services is questionable. The provincial weather bureau told state media it had issued a report warning of the coming torrential rains two days in advance. As per the provincial emergency department, a total of 276,000 residents had been relocated to safer places as of July 22. However, in the Jinguang road tunnel alone, **hundreds** of cars were still trapped. The tunnel is four kilometers long and pumping out water will take time. Nevertheless, reportage is being done to reflect a return to normalcy. There are differences between the way in which the state media is reporting the disaster mentioning the Herculean tasks that remain; and between the reports, images being shared by the public. Censorship continues to work actively as the WeChat user who questioned whether the disaster was human-made linked to the blasting of a dam near Zhengzhou was censored for **“violating regulations”**. Two dams collapsed in just 48 hours, and others are at risk of collapse. As stated by the local media on July 21, the Guojiaju dam near Zhengzhou had already collapsed which prompted devastating floods. It was the second dam to have fallen. The other dam is the Xiaolangdi dam while the Yihetan dam is still at risk of collapsing as local authorities have warned that the rainfall has caused a 20 meter breach in the dam and that it **“could collapse at any time.”**

In July itself, two other dams had collapsed in Inner Mongolia, and people were evacuated, with no casualties reported. The current floods in Henan are reminiscent of the **flooding in 2005** when two temporary dams collapsed in Xinxiang in Henan. What is astonishing nevertheless is China’s determination to go ahead with its dam construction sprees, without paying heed to city planning or to environmental concerns. For India, this should be a wakeup call given the fact that China has constructed dams on the Brahmaputra in Tibet and every year there is massive flooding in downstream Assam. A collapse of the dams will only mean further devastation for India.

What is also worrisome is the attention paid by authorities on surveillance of reportage on calamities, which could have been paid to disaster mitigation instead. The ways in which China tries to control the narrative on these devastating floods is reminiscent of the way in which it first gave out wrong information about the non-transmission of COVID between humans and then the clampdown on doctors and medical practitioners when they tried informing the public about the virus, and thirdly upon citizens themselves as they widely shared images of dying patients in hospitals without adequate care and medical infrastructure. The arrival of technology was supposed to help humankind in better responding to crises. However, the ways in which China has mastered its usage is only for the detriment of humankind and is actually a step backward in human progress.

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