

China

Revive the Grand Canal project

by Gregory Buhyoff

Work has recently begun on a large-scale project to modernize an ancient system of canals joining China's greatest river, the Yangtze, with the Yellow River and other major rivers and lakes of northern China. The south-north water diversion project centers on the modernization of the famous "Grand Canal," an ancient artificial waterway over which grain taxes were once shipped to the northern imperial capitals from the rice-growing regions of the south. The project could become the major artery in a badly-needed network of domestic waterways joining the northern and southern parts of the country, as well as provide a water-control and irrigation system to divert excess water from the Yangtze valley river

system to the dry north.

Since all of the major rivers in China run from east to west, commerce between the northern and southern regions of China has historically been difficult. The Grand Canal was the first important transportation link between the north and south, connecting the Yangtze, Huai, Yellow, Wei, and Hai river systems, constituting an important practical and symbolic link between northern and southern China. The Grand Canal, or Da Yunhe as it is known to the Chinese, was one of the greatest public work projects of its time, comparable, in terms of manpower and materials, to the Great Wall. It was built in sections with the major work carried out under Sui Emperor Yang Chien during the late 6th and early 7th centuries and later in the 13th century under the Yuan regime. It stretches approximately 900 miles from the rich rice-growing regions of the Yangtze River valley to the outskirts of Peking.

Over the centuries sections of the canal fell into disrepair and little work was done to make it capable of serving the needs of a modern industrial economy. Today, despite the introduction of rail and air transport, China remains critically deficient in its ability to transport goods from the north to the south and vice versa.

The Grand Canal project was recently revived by the Chinese government as part of a comprehensive plan to modernize China's domestic transport system. The project had originally been proposed in 1978, but was one of many large infrastructural projects to fall victim to the 1979-81 "economic readjustment" which emphasized fiscal restraint. The project was resubmitted by the Ministry of Water Conservation and Electric Power and approved at last December's meeting of the National People's Congress. It is now considered one of the most important large-scale projects in the New Five Year Plan, and is one of the keys to China's goal of quadrupling agricultural and industrial production by the end of the century.

The primary objectives of the project are:

1. To increase transport capacity, particularly the means to move large amounts of coal from soon-to-be exploited mines in the northern provinces to Shanghai and other industrial cities for energy production and export.
2. Water diversion from the Yangtze River to the northern cities suffering critical water shortages.
3. To provide, in conjunction with smaller canals and river systems, a means to control water supplies for irrigation in the parched agricultural regions of the North China Plain.

Though only the first stage of the project, dredging and widening of the 200-mile section of the canal between the cities of Yangzhou and Xuzhou, has been approved definitively by the State Council, the Grand Canal project is reportedly being considered on the basis of a ten-year, two-stage perspective. However, because of the economic debate which continues to divide the Chinese leadership, the scope of this, like a number of other key infrastructural projects, remains undecided.

