

Transforming the Water Regime: State, Society, and Ecology of the Jiangnan Plain in Late Imperial and Modern China

Yan Gao

The goal of my project is to understand the transformation of the society and ecology of Central China in late imperial and modern periods (roughly from 1600s to 1900s). I focus on the alluvial Jiangnan plain where wetlands, lakes, and rivers were once the major sources for land reclamation, and where sustainability of the plain relied heavily on the successful management of water resources and flood control. I use the *yuan* (a diked enclosure for agricultural cultivation and flood control in wet rice paddy fields) as the primary object of my research into state politics, social relations, and ecological changes in this region. My aim is to reinterpret the major political events (i.e., the Manchu-Han tensions) and socioeconomic transformations (i.e., in the militarization of water management in rural communities) during late imperial and modern China from an environmental perspective.

I use water as a parameter in the triangular relationship among the state, society, and the environment. Thus, the state might provide leadership in extracting, preserving, or restoring the hydraulic environment, thereby inducing environmental change; society might intensify or alter its ways of managing environmental resources, leading to responses from the state and changes in the environment; or, the environment itself might change and exert an impact on both state policy and social dynamics.

To elucidate this triangular relationship, my project interweaves two thematic issues: the first is the declensionist story of high population pressure causing overextraction and exhaustion of resources; the second is the dialectic of the evolving relationship between state policy and local community resource management. In developing these two lines of inquiry, my book reconstructs some of the major historical events of late imperial and modern China from an environmental perspective.

I use a variety of sources including local gazetteers, official memorials, records of leading cases (precedent setting legal decisions), climate data, tax records, state and provincial archives, and stele inscriptions. My work takes an interdisciplinary approach to historical studies by employing concepts and methods from other disciplines including geography, climatology, ecology, political science, and economics. In so doing, my book shows that water resources and their management are not merely the initial context of social transformations, but active participants in them.

As an environmental history of Central China during late imperial and modern times, my book also demonstrates how key environmental issues in contemporary societies—such as the state's resource management policies and the autonomy of local communities—have evolved in China's historical past. Given China's current and highly centralized governmental model, its vast ongoing water projects (such as the South-North Water Transfer Project), and its unfolding environmental crises (along with their attendant social and economic consequences), the historic issue of water management and the triangular state-society-environment relationship from the late imperial period through to the Mao era has profound implications for contemporary China, and for hydraulic policies worldwide.