Corporate Humanitarianism and the Grand Canal Project

Shirley Ye
University of Birmingham

In the wake of the apparent failure of the American Red Cross to aid refugees from the Huai River floods, and amidst the international conflict of the First World War and turbulent politics of the early Republic, Chinese groups approached one American corporation to aid with the reconstruction of the Grand Canal. American involvement in the Grand Canal Improvement Scheme was symptomatic of an emerging global technocratic vision to develop large-scale infrastructure projects. Although the project relied upon the earlier institutional precedents of the treaty port river conservancy organizations, there were significant differences. National sovereignty, not imperialism, justified the aims of the project. Within a few years, the project failed: Chinese elites wanted more investment in indigenous institutions, while American backers, ultimately distrustful of the domestic Chinese political situation, pulled out, judging Beiyang politics to be too chaotic for the scale of investment needed in the project. However, American engineers and businessmen continued their engagement with China in a humanitarian framework. Shifting their efforts away from infrastructure development, American and Chinese elites now focused on charitable relief for refugees. The paper unpacks the shifting and blurred boundaries between corporate involvement and humanitarian engagement during the early years of the Republic.

Shirley Ye is a lecturer in Asian history at the University of Birmingham. Her dissertation, completed at Harvard University in 2013, was about the evolving role of Germans under the auspices of European imperialism in modern China’s economic and environmental transformation. Her current research considers global scientific and technological exchanges in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and book in progress is about the global politics and science of water control in China and beyond.

All seminars take place on Wednesdays (unless otherwise arranged) at 5pm in rooms 8 & 9 in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge. Tea will be served at the same venue at 4:45pm. All are welcome.