China Research Seminar Series

Reading the Sky, Divining the Flood

Predicting the Weather in Late Imperial China

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2pm, 26 January (Thursday), 2023 (in-person seminar)

Room LG18 (Faculty of Law, Sidgwick Site)

Abstract

Pre-modern farmers across the world feared that droughts, floods or other poor weather would ruin their harvests. With these worries, they were anxious to predict the coming year's weather. In Late Imperial China, these farmers would closely observe the stars, snows, thunder, frosts, sunshine, winds, birds, flowers and a host of other natural phenomena, as these – according to their time of observance – could all be used to predict weather conditions. Pre-modern weather prognostications were closely related to local popular cultures and systems of thought. This talk will approach the topic from the writings on weather prognostications by the people living in the climatically unstable Early Qing period (1644-1722). Where do we find records of weather prognostications in these years? Who used them? Were they the same people who recorded them? How great were the differences in weather prognostication methods within the climatically diverse Manchu-Chinese empire – did people in China's North and South predict the harvest in the same way?

Speaker

Erling Agøy holds a Ph.D. from the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental languages at the University of Oslo and is currently based at the Needham Research Institute in Cambridge as a Soon-Young Kim research fellow. After graduation and before his NRI fellowship Agøy was a Junior Research Fellow at the IKGF, University of Erlangen–Nuremberg, and a senior lecturer teaching Classical Chinese and environmental history in China at the University of Oslo. His research interests encompass Late Imperial China and Chinese environmental history (especially in the 17th-18th centuries), including the impact of climate change on history; adaptation to climatic challenges; historical perceptions of climate; prognostications for weather conditions by farmers and elites; and the history of traditional Chinese meteorology/weather-lore in the transition to modernity (his NRI research topic).