MANIPULATING THE YELLOW RIVER AND THE STATE FORMATION OF THE NORTHERN SONG DYNASTY

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Abstract

In the summer of 1048 the lower reaches of the Yellow River shifted its course northwards into the Hebei Plain. Seemingly a natural disaster, this course shift was to a great extent caused by the hydraulic ideology and practices of the Northern Song state (960–1127). By examining the Yellow River floods and the responses from the authorities in the tenth century, the present paper suggests the emergence of a new, systematic hydraulic agenda, which regarded the successful flood control of the Yellow River as a significant part of the political unity of the early Song state. This new agenda justified itself by the flood-control model of ancient sages. It prioritised the security and interests of Henan, the area south of the river, and used the land in the north, Hebei, as the alternative flood ground. This paper investigates the changing geopolitical situation, Emperor Taizu’s reflections on the river issues, various hydraulic proposals of Song officials, and flood-control practices from the late tenth to the mid-eleventh century. With insights on the evolution of these hydraulic ideologies, policies and practices, this study argues that the human-induced concentration of hydrological pressure on the river’s northern bank led to the northward course shift in 1048. The Song state’s heavy interventions in the pattern of the Yellow River were founded on the state’s desire for and design of an ideal physical landscape that could help foster a beneficial political landscape. All of its hydraulic efforts, along with other policies in the early stages of its rule, sought to promote core interests of the state and to achieve unity, and by so doing to form a stable, centralised state that had been absent in China for the previous two centuries.

1. Introduction

Established in 960, the Northern Song Dynasty inherited from its predecessors a situation of remarkable disintegration and decentralisation in China’s political, territorial, military and economic realms, circumstances that had prevailed since the An Lushan Rebellion in the mid-eighth century. Against this legacy was the new regime’s desire to rebuild the socio-political order and revive the cosmopolitan empire once seen in the high Tang period. Its efforts took many forms: the conquests of various kingdoms in South China;
expeditions to pull down the Northern Han kingdom in Shanxi; frequent battles with the Khitan (Liao dynasty 907–1125) to recover the sixteen lost Han Chinese prefectures in northern Hebei and Shanxi; the deprivation of military power from its eminent generals; a concentration of professional troops in the metropolitan area of Kaifeng; the promotion of the civil examination system as well as the status of scholar-officials to form a professional, hierarchical bureaucratic team; the concentration of social wealth and resources from various parts of the empire in the capital area through a far-reaching water transportation system, and so on. All these measures, which took place over a mere few decades, effectively fostered the aggregation of political and economic power into the hands of the emperor and his central government, and facilitated the formation of a strong, stable state that had long been absent in China.

The present paper suggests that, similar to its attitude about regional warlords and its Inner Asian enemies, the early Northern Song state also viewed unfavourable environmental conditions as a decentralising force, which obstructed the new regime from achieving political unity. The Yellow River’s frequent floods and bank ruptures appeared particularly harmful. From the mid-tenth century on, the lower reaches of the Yellow River suffered frequent floods. Many of them spread southward to victimise the heartland of the state, Henan, where the capital city Kaifeng was located. In order to guard the state’s core interests, the early Song government sought to match its hydraulic efforts with the achievement of the ancient sages, and preached an ideology that flood control of the Yellow River bore moral and cosmological significance. It applied such ideology as a guideline for its hydraulic practices and treated the river’s northern and southern banks differently. In 1048, the river breached its northern bank. Instead of running south to plague Henan as it often did in the previous centuries, the river’s entire course shifted northward into Hebei and remained there until the end of the dynasty.

Through the examination of the river’s flooding problems in the century and a half prior to 1048, the present paper will analyse the evolvement of the hydraulic policies, strategies and technical solutions in the early Song period. It will argue that the emergence and development of the Song state’s hydraulic ideology and its resulting practices gradually led to the concentration of the river’s massive hydropower on its northern bank, and changed the dynamics of the river flow. When additional variables, such as a heavy storm in the river valley that raised the chance of an overflow or a bank