

## The River, the Plain, and the State

On July 19, 1048, the Yellow River breached its banks, drastically changing its course across the Hebei Plain and turning it into a delta where the river sought a path out to the ocean. This dramatic shift of forces in the natural world resulted from political deliberation and hydraulic engineering of the imperial state of the Northern Song Dynasty. It created 80 years of social suffering, economic downturn, political upheaval, and environmental changes, which reshaped medieval North China Plain and challenged the state. Ling Zhang deftly applies textual analysis, theoretical provocation, and modern scientific data in her gripping analysis of how these momentous events altered China's physical and political landscapes and how its human communities adapted and survived. In so doing, she opens up an exciting new field of research by wedding environmental, political, economic, and social history in her examination of one of North China's most significant environmental changes.

Ling Zhang is Assistant Professor of History at Boston College.

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# The River, the Plain, and the State

*An Environmental Drama in Northern Song China,  
1048–1128*

LING ZHANG  
*Boston College*



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*For my parents, Qiqi, and David*

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## Acknowledgments

In summer 2008, I finished my doctoral dissertation at Cambridge, which was an economic history of north China during the Northern Song Dynasty. A small section of the dissertation deals with the Yellow River's floods. Because of that, I was offered a fellowship at Harvard in fall 2009, which enabled me to move across continents to pursue an "environmental history" of medieval China. Yet, having read only Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl* and Mark Elvin's *Sediments of Time* and *The Retreat of the Elephants*, I saw "environmental history" as a rather foreign concept and debated its legitimacy as a self-defined sub-discipline of history. I viewed the title of "environmental historian" as a heavy hat people placed on my head rather than a self-identity deriving from proper scholarly training.

Confused yet intrigued by the murky path laid in front of me, I have since begun a journey of soul searching, identity building, and intellectual self-reinvention. While this journey has been full of frustration – not knowing what to do or whether I'm doing it right – and loneliness – being at the margins of many established scholarly fields – it has also liberated me from various constraints and allowed me to venture into a splendid intellectual universe. Like a hungry child, I have tried to devour whatever seemed tasty and nutritious, be it history or social science or natural science, theoretical or empirical, and about medieval China or about the modern West in the twenty-first century.

The present book is the outcome of this six-year journey. It is a modest experiment that seeks to capture how things entangle to constitute a messy, wild, blossoming world – a process similar to my formation of a new identity through wonderful encounters with different people and ideas. It is a peculiar telling of history that embodies my current

philosophical positions, political pursuits, and intellectual desires. This book is not simply a study of a remote history; it is a documentation of the growth of my personhood.

This book and this wonderful journey would never have become possible without the support from many individuals and research institutes. My longtime mentor Wang Xiaofu at Peking University has never stopped inspiring me with this powerful line: “Ling, one must first have dreams.” St John’s College, Asian Studies, and the Needham Research Institute at the University of Cambridge paved a solid foundation for my training in Sinology and my interests in economic history and the history of science and technology. My loving doctor-parents Joseph and Hiroko McDermott watched every moment of my growth. They patiently taught me how to think, what makes an argument, and why some ideas are more meaningful than others. Taking the role as my first teacher for academic English, Joe painstakingly corrected my grammatical errors, which were nearly in every sentence I composed. For all the headaches and grey hair he got from my writing, I offer my sincere apology and deep appreciation.

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## Abbreviations

GSJ	<i>Gongshi ji</i>
MXBT	<i>Mengxi bitan</i>
OYXQJ	<i>Ouyang Xiu quanji</i>
QSW	<i>Quan Songwen</i>
SHY	<i>Song huiyao jigao</i>
SHYBB	<i>Song huiyao jigao bubian</i>
SMCZY	<i>Song mingchen zouyi</i>
SS	<i>Song shi</i>
SSWJ	<i>Songshan wenji</i>
XCB	<i>Xu Zizhitongjian changbian</i>
XCBSB	<i>Xu Zizhitongjian changbian shibu</i>
XSBGZY	<i>Xiaosu Baogong zouyi</i>