

Navigating through Disorder: Water Systems and Politics on the Yangzi River in Late Imperial China

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This paper examines the intertwined history of water systems and politics in late imperial central China, primarily focusing on the waterway transport on the Yangzi River and its tributaries. Waterway navigation depends on both social and water systems. While humans, through state policies and social groups, fundamentally ordered waterway transport, their interventions were also conditioned by a variety of disorderly ecological factors including but not limited to water velocity, currents' speed and direction, meandering and sedimentation. For centuries, the Yangzi River network in the vicinity of Hubei had been an important part of both the grain transport system and the regional trade network. This paper analyzes how various social and ecological agencies – such as the imperial grain tribute system, competing boatmen gangs, weather, the agro-ecological condition of the middle Yangzi hinterlands, floods, and the interruptions of human warfare (esp. the Taiping wars) shaped and reshaped the waterway transport networks in late imperial central China. In so doing, it sheds light on the interpenetration of social and ecological systems to provide an environment context for state and regional politics as practiced amid the disorderly river waters in late imperial China.