

Seeing Like an Official

Huang Zhen, the Southern Song State, and Limits of Governance in Thirteenth-Century China

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Abstract

The ultimate goal of this talk is to examine how the mid-imperial Chinese state was sustained from the ground up. To do so, I take readers into the world of Huang Zhen 黃震 (1213–1281), a local official during the last decades of the Southern Song. By seeing the state as he saw it, I unpack his meticulous records of local governance—records that remain some of the most detailed accounts of the era. Through Huang’s cases, I challenge the still-dominant view of the Southern Song state as one of limited societal control and deliberate retreat. Instead, I would like to show a state adapting pragmatically to the challenges of an expanding literati elite, the failure of the New Policies, and mounting external threats. Here, I draw on James Scott’s concept of “practical knowledge, informal processes, and improvisation in the face of unpredictability” to shed light on the Southern Song’s often-overlooked flexibility in governance.

About the Speaker

Sukhee Lee is an associate professor of history at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. Originally from South Korea, he obtained his BA and MA degrees in history from Yonsei University before going to the US for his doctoral studies. He graduated from Harvard University in 2009. His first book, *Negotiated Power: The State, Elites, and Local Governance in Twelfth-to Fourteenth Century China*, was published by Harvard University Asia Center in 2014. He has recently submitted two book-length manuscripts to publishers: an annotated translation of *Zhoulian xulu* 書簾緒論 (Pulling Down the Screen during the Daytime: Discourses on Simple and Easy Governance), a 13th-century handbook for county magistrates, and *Seeing Like an Official: Huang Zhen, the Southern Song State, and Limits of Governance in Thirteenth-Century China*.