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How and Why «Profit» Mattered in Chinese Hydraulic Reform in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries

By Cho-ying Li

The paper I presented at the 34th “History of Technology” conference on the 18th of November, 2011 will be published by “T’oung Pao” in 2012. While the title of my presentation at the conference is “How and Why ‘Profit’ Mattered in Chinese Hydraulic Reform in the 16th and Early 17th Centuries,” the title of my “T’oung Pao” article is “Beneficiary Pays: Forging Reciprocal Connections between Private Profit and Public Good in Hydraulic Reform in the Lower Yangzi Delta, 1520s–1640s.” “T’oung Pao” is one of the most prestigious sinology journals in the world. With the permission of its editor, Professor Pierre-Étienne Will of Collège de France, I would like to share the abstract of my article with the readers of Ferrum as follows.

Am 18. November 2011 hielt ich anlässlich der 34. Konferenz zur Technikgeschichte ein Referat zum Thema «Wie und warum Profit ein wichtiges Anliegen der Wasserbaureform in China im 16. und frühen 17. Jahrhundert war». Dieses Referat wird 2012 im «T’oung Pao» unter dem Namen «Nutznieserprinzip: Gegenseitige Beziehungen zwischen privatem Profit und dem Allgemeinwohl von Wasserbaureformen im unteren Delta des Yangzi, 1520–1640» veröffentlicht. «T’oung Pao» ist eine der weltweit renommiertesten Zeitschriften für Sinologie. Mit der Genehmigung des Herausgebers, Professor Pierre-Étienne Will vom Collège de France, möchte ich das Abstract dieses Artikels mit den Lesern von Ferrum teilen.

This article focuses on the “beneficiary-pays principle” in hydraulic discourse and the process through which it was put into practice from the 1520s to the 1640s in the Lower Yangzi Delta. It investigates the roles of the hydraulic reformist elite and like-minded officials in the formation of the new hydraulic order. It also demonstrates that the implementation of the beneficiary-pays principle was instrumental in redefining the division of responsibility between the government and the people and in building a reciprocal connection between the pursuit of private gain and the fulfillment of the public good. Furthermore, it shows that after the general application of this principle became a shared view, the government and the people used it to solve disputes and defend their right. This article concludes that the new order was not achieved solely by coercion – policy deliberation and persuasion were also significant in the realization of the beneficiary-pays principle.



Dr. Cho-ying Li

Dr. Cho-ying Li was born in 1967. He obtained Harvard PhD in East Asian languages and civilizations in 2007. After one year of post-doctoral research at National University of Singapore, he returned to Taiwan and started teaching at National Tsing Hua University in 2008. Recently, his article “Contending strategies, collaboration among local specialists and officials, and hydrological reform in the late-fifteenth-century Lower Yangzi Delta,” “East Asian Science, Technology, and Society: An International Journal” 4:2 (2010) won the 2011 Zhu Kezhen Award offered by the International Society for the History of East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine. Dr. Li has a wide range of academic interests, including intellectual history, socio-cultural history, local history, and history of science.