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HSCI 5533
September 8, 2012

Technology and the Imperial Court

The Imperial Court subsection of the larger work, *Cultures of Knowledge: Technology in Chinese History*, deals specifically with the relationship between technological advancement and the Chinese court. More specifically the essays deal with the Chinese Emperor's relationship to technology. The first two works deal with specific historical instances while the third neatly ties them together revealing that they are both examples of a very Chinese idea of technology and its place within the Imperial system.

Heping Liu begins the section with a discussion of the earliest attempts at controlling the flooding of the Yellow River. Within a span of 167 years the river changed its course five times. This unpredictability of nature had dire effects on those living in close proximity to the river. Liu mentions the importance of technological power and the experiments with hydraulics, dams, dikes, etc. to help control the flooding. What is striking, according to Liu, is that the Emperor became personally concerned with the issue. Emperor Yu's relationship with this project led to the earliest flood myths. The myth illuminates Yu's position as the controller of the river, and how he went from a "hydraulic leader" to a "dynastic father."

While the importance of the dynastic aftermath of flood control is important to understand the idea of ancient Chinese culture, there is a more important aspect of Liu's research that could have an impact on modern China as well as the world. Ecologically speaking Liu's work should be looked at regarding deforestation and flooding. Liu writes

that Ancient sources account many floods as the result of cutting all the timber. Areas with lower rainfall were in greater danger of flooding than areas with higher rainfall, and the major difference between the two was forests. Ancient source also revealed that once this was established fast growing trees were planted in an attempt to alleviate that problem. Ironically, Liu writes, the workers ran into a situation where protective trees were cut down to build flood control devices. These instances should be studied so as modern engineers attempt to make areas safer and less flood prone, they do not remove an affective natural method in order to replace it with a less affective manmade one.

Liu works readily with ancient Chinese sources and traces the historiography back to the original myths of Yu and flood control as well as the actual truths of the matter. Flood control and Yu are almost inseparable within the story. Liu backs up his assertions with several illustrations that showed Yu as an active participant in the building, but mentions that this is unlikely. This assertion is backed up later in this section.

Lou Wenhua's essay *Foreign Craftsmen in the Qing Court* studies the impact of foreign craftsmen on the Imperial Court. Specifically Wenhua looks at the conscription of Nepalese craftsman to work on the renovations of the Yonghe Palace. Wenhua shows the marked difference in the attitudes toward the foreign craftsmen by comparing the Emperor's welcoming and daily interest in their work with the Han officer's xenophobia.

The point that Wenhua makes is that what is important is not what the craftsmen were hired to do, or even that they came from Nepal to do it, what is important is that they were *invited* to come to China and do it. The commissioned work could have been carried out in Nepal and the finished product simple delivered to the Emperor. But with The craftsmen, who many Chinese scholars believed carried Buddhism from India and

made it so prolific in Tibet, could also help establish it within the Palace. Originally hired at a low wage, once the evidence of their craftsmanship was revealed, either by the *yang*, or model, they had brought, or by their actual productions, Wenhua describes the Qianlong Emperor rewarding them handsomely.

The involvement of the Emperor in the day-to-day work on the temple receives most of Wenhua's time. This was the reason there were foreign craftsmen working in China in the first place. According to historical documents and accounts, which Wenhua uses throughout the essay, the Emperor talked with and watched the craftsmen as they worked. These things could not have been done if the Emperor had simply ordered finished monuments from Nepal. The results of the relationship between the Emperor and the craftsmen are recorded in ancient texts and have been researched by Wenhua to portray an Emperor who certainly wants the best craftsmen, but also values the cross cultural experience that can make the outcome of his temple renovation more than mere things, but also a renovation of *ideas*. Wenhua's research is, like Kiu's, grounded in ancient text and presented in such a way that even researchers with little understanding of Chinese religion or politics can follow.

Both of these essays can be summed up in Wolfgang Lefevre's *Symbolic Technology Politics*, in fact, they are. Lefevre discusses both instances and postulates that they are "not simple transmission. The ideas of the work-master and hydraulic leader are both ideas of how the emperor would be engaged in his technological instance. He explores more into Wenhua's theme of "importing ideas" while at the same time contests that Yu would never have actually had an active role in flood control. Lefevre's essay is also the tie in to "western" ideas of leaders and technology.

He discusses Karl Wittfogel's Hydraulic Theory only inasmuch as to say that there are no western equivalents of the "hydraulic civilizations" in the east. The major theme however of Lefevre's synthesis is what should be taken from reading the essays. That is, the relationship between leaders and technology in the East was one that saw the workers as "house-members" and were treated accordingly. This is in stark contrast to the Western notion of workers being part of a lower caste. That is to say that the West possessed an ideology on the basis of the "possession" of technology, while the East and especially the Imperial Court of Ancient China held a view of "sponsorship" of technology. Only in light of this understanding can archaeologist, cultural historians, and historians of science really begin to understand the idea of the role that technology played in society in general and in China in particular. Lefevre's work sums up the section on technology within the Imperial Court of China nicely, as well as illustrates how actual physical examples can help to flesh out simple theoretical models.