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"The Problem of Commemorating: Epitaph Writing and Filial Expression in the Northern Song (960-1125)"

a lecture by

Cong Ellen Zhang

University of Virginia

Associate Professor of History

Friday, February 28, 2014

4:00 pm

**Jennings Hall, Room 140
(1735 Neil Avenue)**



Bio

Cong Ellen Zhang is an associate professor of history at the University of Virginia. Her research focuses on the political and social elites, travel culture, and women and the family in the Song Dynasty. She is the author of *Transformative Journeys: Travel and Culture in Song China* (University of Hawaii Press, 2011). Her current research examines changes in the discourses on and practice of filial piety in the Northern Song.

Thousands of epitaphs (muzhiming 墓誌銘) have survived from the Song Dynasty (960-1279). These documents consistently portray the deceased as filial sons, erudite scholars, capable officials, and generous clan and community leaders. Considering the nature and utility of these records, this tendency to speak well of the dead is hardly surprising. That these biographies were overwhelmingly celebratory does not necessarily mean that the writing process was free of contention and negotiation. On the contrary, epitaph-writing could be a major source of anxiety for all parties involved. In the Northern Song, a proper epitaph for one's parents was increasingly seen as one of the most crucial filial obligations of the mourning son. As a result, an ideal filial son was often burdened with traveling long distance and overcoming extreme physical and emotional obstacles to secure a proper and desirable biographer. The biographer also faced major challenges, often dealing with what he considered to be unreasonable and excessive demands from the deceased's family. To maintain a delicate balance between satisfying the deceased's family and preserving his own authorial credentials proved a daunting task for the writer. The frustration expressed by leading literary figures of the time and the emphasis these men placed on the reliability of the funerary biographies that they authored further highlights the negotiation and compromises that occurred in the writing process.

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