



The Impossibility of Remembering the Past at Nanjing

Guest Lecture by

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Wednesday, May 16, 2018, 6 pm - 8 pm

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Abstract

Nanjing, a city that served as the capital of multiple Chinese dynasties, has experienced repeated cycles of prosperity and conquest. Stephen Owen has explored how its poetic history has transposed the actual reality of the city, turning it into a “site of memory”. In this talk, I examine how “meditating on the past” after the Rape of Nanjing became virtually impossible. In particular, the weight of memory at Nanjing was reflected in the classical-style poems by poets in Wang Jingwei’s collaborationist regime, established under the Japanese patronage at Nanjing in 1940. For a regime struggling with its own legitimacy, “meditating on the past” would suggest that it, too, would suffer from the fate of conquest. Their reaction to the burden of literary tradition ranged from self-defense to whistful denial, but most commonly a pregnant aphasia. The ways in which Wang and his followers treated this topic become therefore a case study on the complex of cultural memory, political legitimization, and literary representation in occupied China.
