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Analysis on the Credibility of Materials Provided by Local Chronicle in Ancient Feudalism China

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Abstract:

Local chronicle is the popular in ancient classics of China, which amounts for the tenth of the total Chinese ancient classics. The editors of the local chronicle asserted that the local chronicle was reliable. Besides, the editing process of local chronicle need huge funds, and it was also regarded as one important achievement of the local officials, which stimulated the local officials to edit the contemporary local chronicle and reedit the previous local chronicle, so the local chronicle in the different regions often seems successive. Many researches were based on the local chronicles. However, the reliability of local chronicle is doubtful in the content and writing style. The paper investigates the editing process of local chronicle, in order to discover the shortcomings of the local chronicle and provide some warning for the researchers who use the local chronicle as the researching materials.

Keywords: *Local chronicle, power, editing process, literati, subjectivity.*

1. Introduction

In China, the local chronicle is some kind like the local encyclopedia. It is one kind of important ancient books, which amounts to the 10% of the total ancient books of China. Even today, there are special offices in the governments at all levels, which are responsible for editing the local chronicle.

In the academic research of the social and natural spheres, the local chronicle plays an important role, especially in the recent years. In 1930s, the historical value attracted many historians. Some historians, such as GuJiegang and Tao Xisheng, published papers about how to use the local chronicle to study the history. Some researchers published the paper based on the local chronicle, such as Tan QiXiang's *The Origin of Hunan People*. In 1950s, Hsiao Kung-chuan published *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century*, which is based on the local chronicle to study the levy system in Qing dynasty. In 1990s, Fan Shuzhi publish his *Research on the Cities and Towns in the Regions south of the Yangtze River in Ming and Qing Dynasty*, which also depended on the materials provided by the local chronicle.

The local chronicle provides many useful research materials, but are the materials provided by local chronicle provide all real? Just as other ancient books, the local chronicle was edited with the influence of subjective will. So the objectivity of them is suspicious.

2. The History of Local Chronicle in China

In the ancient historic and geographic books, some factors were similar to those of the local chronicle. Some books, such as the geographic books *Yugong* and *Shanhaijing*, the historic books *Jinsheng* and *Yuejueshu*, all recorded the local condition or history. But such books were not the local chronicle in an absolute sense.

In Qin dynasty, the huge empire was formed and the development of the locals were unbalanced. There were different languages, customs and cultures in the different places, so the books specialized as recording the conditions of different places appeared. In the next dynasties, such as Sui and Tang dynasties, some new contents such as economic and politic conditions in the different regions appeared in the local chronicle.

Song dynasty was featured by the fast development and application of publishing technology. The books were published with the improved quality and quantity. The government also valued the knowledge and the intellectuals got high treatment. So the academic research was active. In the government at all levels, there were special institutes for editing the local chronicle. From Song dynasty, the local chronicle editing was hosted by the special institutes of governments, especially in Qing dynasty, the institutes got more perfect. More intellectuals took part in the editing local chronicle, and some famous intellectuals did the systemic research on the local chronicle.

The editing of local chronicle in China was successive in two thousand years. If the local government of previous time did not edit the local chronicle, the government would edit the local chronicle of previous time. So the local chronicle of the local regions was successive. It provides the comprehensive information of the local history, culture, custom and products.

3. The Editing Process of the Local Chronicle

The editing process of local chronicle is different from the that of other books. Take the local chronicles of Guangdong for example, the chronicle editing was hosted by the private or the government. But no matter it was hosted by the private or the government, the editors were all the elites in that time. "In Ming dynasty, there were three local chronicles of province, the editors of which were all the metropolitan graduates. The local chronicles of prefectures were fifteen, and the editors of those included 10 metropolitan graduates and 4 provincial graduates; The local chronicles of counties were 30, with 8 metropolitan graduates and 14 provincial graduates. In Qing dynasty, the local chronicles of provinces were 3, and the editors of those were 2 government student and 4 provincial graduates. The prefecture local chronicles were 28, the editor of which were 8 provincial graduates and 3 metropolitan graduates. The state local chronicles were 18, and 3 metropolitan graduates and 5 provincial graduates were the editors. The county local chronicles were 276, including the editors of 72 metropolitan graduates and 96 provincial graduates." (Hu, Q. 1993)

In Qin and Han dynasties, the local chronicle editing had no special governmental institute. But from Song dynasty, the special institutes were set up for editing the local chronicle. In the current governments at all levels of China, there are the local chronicle offices. Huge financial and human resources are put in the editing chronicle.

Before the editing of local chronicle, the local gentry would apply for the editing local chronicle orally, then the formal application document would be submitted to the officials. In the formal document, the editor team would be suggested. (Hu, X. 2011) The funds of the editing came from the officials' salary or the donations from the local gentry etc., but most of the funds came from the donation of the local gentry.

The local chronicle was different from the authorized history in that the local chronicle recorded the contemporary condition and depended on the interview and material collection in practice. One of the most important steps of editing local chronicle was to investigate the materials. The participants of editing would check the previous recordings and investigate the fact in practice. The sources of materials for local chronicle included the materials got through the site survey and interview, the materials got from the documents that collected by the governments or privates, or the materials from the authorized history or previous local chronicle. (Hu, X.2011) Most of the surveyors or the collectors for the materials in previous books were the relatives or the family numbers of the local powerful landlords or the influential officials in that times.

The local chronicle would be reedited, because the editors of the next generations wanted to expand or revise the content of previous versions.

4. The Features of Local Chronicle

The local chronicle is different from other books in the aspects of content and form. In Ming dynasty, the form of the chronicles was required exactly and strictly. In Yongle period of Ming dynasty, the form of chronicle was ruled in *Local Chronicle Form*. It required every local chronicle should include the reformation of the political system, territory, city, mountain, towns, product, levy, tribute, field, custom, school, army, temple, bridge, historic site, achievement of the local officer, the famous people, poem etc. The rules for the chronicle form were important for the unification of the chronicle. (Zhu, G. 2000)

The form of chronicle ruled in Ming dynasty was very useful in the editing of local chronicle. "It made clear the content of every chapter. The editors only need fill the chapter ruled by the *Local Chronicle Form* according to the collected materials. It was very convenient." (Zhu, G.2000) SimaGuang in Song dynasty believed that the local chronicles were the encyclopedias. (Sima, G. *The Collection of SimaGuang*. Vol.65. The Preface of Local Chronicle of Henan Province. 1080)The local chronicle provides almost the complete material about the related regions. If one wants to know about the history and the condition of one region, one of the best way is to read about the local chronicle of the region. Some scholars and editors believed that the chronicle could made the politicians comprehend his political business, the scholars who study the custom understand the custom, the historians check the recordings of the history, the scholars who wanted to set about the theories find the previous works related to the theories, the ones who tended to making friends with others have the talking materials. (Li, M. 1991)

The local chronicles are like the serious historic recordings, because the editing of the local chronicles required a lot for the editors, for example, Zheng Qingyun put forward that the editors of the local chronicle should be erudite, professional and justice. (Zheng, Q. 1986) So the local chronicle had the function of recording the history. Zhang Xuecheng, the famous local chronicle scholar said: "The local chronicle recorded many characters. It was the supplement and reference for the authorized history. It pointed out the mistakes of the authorized history and expanded the authorized history. So it was the valuable recording." (Zhang, S. 1934)

5. The Powers that Influence the Editing Process of the Local Chronicle

However, the editing process of the local chronicle was influenced by the powers from different forces.

It is necessary to analyze the editors' identities in the editing in order to discuss the forces that influenced the editing process. The editors of the local chronicle are mostly the elites of that time, who were well educated, but that was not enough to ensure the justice in the editing process. Although the chief editors were mostly the scholars with the greatest achievement in the academic field, they were not supervised by someone else. So what they wanted to write in the local chronicle was the content they favored of. The other editors would also have the same action. "The editing of the local chronicle had the direct or indirect goals. On the one hand, the local chronicle reflected the political need of the centralized system in the feudal times, on the other hand, the editing of local chronicle is the need of the local powerful landlords." (Wu, Z. 1993)

The purpose of the local chronicle was to serve the domination of the power-holders. It provided the references for the dominators. "If the officials want to see the vast lands without leaving the government, and to know about the nations without leaving home, the best way is to read the local chronicle." (Zhu, Q. 1985) The stable domination depends on the right custom and the culture, and the local

chronicle played an important role in the domination. It propagated the culture and custom that conformed to the will of the dominator. For example, it idolized the models who acted according to the feudal moral and requirement in the section of characters.

The Confucian culture was beneficial to the feudal domination. It maintained the ruling by the rites and emphasized the hierarchy. So in the beginning of imperial competitive examination in China, the Confucian classics were the main reference for the examinees. In history, the Confucian thoughts and code of conduct kept the country run smoothly. The adoption of Confucian thought system began in the west Han dynasty, in that time, the emperor put Dong Zhongshu, the scholar who reformed the traditional Confucian thought through the Daoist and Legalist thought to make it better for the domination of the emperor and elaborated the opinion of divine right of the emperor, to the high position. The reformed Confucian thought by Dong Zhongshu became more beneficial to the domination of the emperor, so the emperor advocated it, especially in the period of Emperor Wu. The first mission of the Confucian was to maintain the ethic relationship between the emperor and the ministers, which was obviously hierarchical.

Local chronicle, as a kind of important reference book for the scholars and officials, was written according to the Confucian ethics and thoughts. The Confucian believed the ruling by the rites was more effective than ruling by the legality, so the rites were very important in the Confucian classics. The local chronicle would list the stories of the moral model in the eyes of the dominators to propagate the Confucian ethics. For example, in the local chronicle of Shandong province in late Qing dynasty, there were the stories of the women moral models, who gave up the fortune through ruining bodies to keep the chastity, because their husbands were dead, or committing suicide. The unmarried women were also described in the chronicle as moral model, because their parents needed their looking after. "The unmarried women, the women committed suicide to keep the chastity and the women destroyed their body because their husbands died composed the huge population of Shandong in Qing dynasty. Through the investigating the special group, we would find the honoring of women in Late Qing dynasty has the special direction and goal, which were not to describe how the women were loyal or filial, but to reinforce the man-rule position and control or maintain the social stability, consolidating the dominant position of Qing regime." (Qin, X. 2004)

The women stories collected in the local chronicle would be chosen with special intention. There would be another living condition of women in that time, but because such women's stories would not have the education function for the feudal regime, so they would not be chosen as the stories in the local chronicle. Even the chosen stories in the local chronicle would be embellished through literary rhetoric's with the special intention and goal. The result was that the real living condition and the need of women were covered and depressed, with the culture and custom being established which conformed to the intention of the dominant regime.

The other stories in the local chronicle would also be contaminated by the dominant regime's intention. The characters collected in the local chronicle were the famous ministers and scholars, the famous honest men, the filial men, or the persons who had special talents, the famous recluses etc. aside from the famous women. All of the persons that propagated in the local chronicle conformed to the ethic or moral requirement of the feudal regime. There were few negative characters were recorded in the local chronicle, but such recording's function was to criticize the activities that would ruin the feudal regime. To some extent, the stories of the negative characters served as a foil to the positive persons.

From the comparison between the character recordings in the local chronicle and standard history, it would also be found that the appearance and prosperity of character recording in local chronicle were conformed to the Confucian and served for the feudal regime. For the content of the local chronicle, there were more recordings about the goodness and less recordings about the evils. The phenomenon was the result of the purpose of the local chronicle. One of the purposes of local chronicle was to reinforce the ethic morality of the related region, so recording the goodness of the local heroes or the famous scholars to manifest, maintain and reinforce the morality significant common in local chronicle. "The general history is different from other kinds of history, for it records both the evil and goodness to manifest the rules for the punishment and reward. Local chronicle is mainly to manifest the goodness and reward; it rarely records the evil." (Jia, H. & Shen, Q. 1659) The recording of local chronicle would not be complete for the related region in the sense.

In the history of the local chronicle editing, the character stories appeared in Song dynasty. Before Song dynasty, there were mainly the geography, specialties or the customs of the recorded places. The characters that recorded in the local chronicle expanded the recordings of the historic character, as supplementary for the standard history. The most prosperous time of the character recording in local chronicle were the periods of Ming and Qing dynasties. "The character recording in local chronicle began in the Song and Yuan dynasties and got prosperous in Ming and Qing dynasties. The process was parallel to the development of Neo-Confucianism. So compared with the character recordings in standard history, the local chronicle's character recordings had more atmosphere of Neo-Confucianism. That was embodied in the phenomenon that the persons, especially the women conformed to Neo-Confucianism morality and ethics occupied more than half of the total characters." (Liu, W. 2003)

Besides the influence of Confucian thought system, the need of the editors also influenced the editing process of local chronicle. For the most of the editors were the local academic elites or the important officials. They would embellish the deeds of their family number, and sometimes they would vilify their foes. In China, the family was very important for a person. The benefit of the individual was combined with that of the family. So the editors of the chronicle would put his family number's good deeds in the chronicle, or even if there were no such deeds, they would make up the deeds.

The local gentry accounted for the most part of the local chronicle of the county, compared with the editing group of local chronicle of the metropolis and province, in which the senior officials accounted for the most part, because the local chronicle of county was deemed not as important as those of the metropolis and province.

The local gentry took part in the editing would incline to embellish themselves or their families. For example, when the senior gentry Shi Jingfen edited *Raozhou Local Chronicle*, *Leping Local Chronicle* and *Nanan Local Chronicle* in Tongzhi period of Qing dynasty, he wrote his own deeds into the chronicle. The gentry recorded themselves in the chronicle, because they wanted to take the advantage

of the chronicle to benefit themselves. Shi Jingfen recorded himself in *Leping Local Chronicle* for 13 times. Even when he described the ones sacrificed in the anti-taiping rebellion, he also mentioned his name. For example, when he introduced Zhou Tianji, who died in the war, he wrote: "Zhou Tianji, who was born in Longyoucounty, worked as the police head. Yin Baoyi, who was the eighth son in his family, lived in Jiancun. They all died miserably in suppressing the bandits. Shi Jingfen recorded those matters in the cooperation with others." (Shi, J.1982) Compared to the senior gentry, the junior gentry had less opportunity to record themselves in local chronicle, because they did not have enough right to do that.

The editor of local chronicle would also record or embellished the deeds of his family numbers. "The more influence of a person on the local society, the more possible that his deeds were recorded in the local chronicle; In the same way, the more influence of a family, the more opportunities the family number had to be recorded in the character volume in the local chronicle." (Xie, W. 1978) For some editors, editing local chronicle provided an opportunity for them to benefit their families. "A few local families controlled the editing process of county local chronicle. Undoubtedly, that provided the opportunity for them to put their families' history into the local chronicle and convert their families' private history to the public history, which was recognized by the main ideology." (Li, X. 2011) For example, the Yang family was very successful in the empirical examination and the official career, so the family control the editing of the local chronicle. Yang Jinghua, one of the ancestors of the family, was redescribed in the local chronicle with more embellishment. In 1603, Yang Jinghua's deed was sample-wise described in the local chronicle. In the following years, his story was retold with more praise. Until in 1753, his story contained not only the deed that he saved many people by preparing the crop, but also the honorable character of him and the spectacular event after his death. Besides, his deed was also expanded with more details and embellishment. The phenomenon was very popular in the material selecting and editing process of the local chronicle. "Take the *Concise History of Macau in Xiangshan County Local Chronicle* as an example, the numbers of He, Yang, Bao, Zhao, Liu, Rong, Zhong families were all recorded. That result must be related with the fact that those family number or the off springs took part in the material selecting and editing for the local chronicle." (Hu, X. 2011)

Taking part in the editing local chronicle was a kind of honor, so some officials would add their names in the group of the editors, even if they did not join the team of editors. For example, the county magistrate, Liu Tainian, put his name under the name of the real chief editor, who was his predecessor, in *Ruijin County Local Chronicle* of Qianlong period in Qing dynasty. In fact, the local chronicle had been completed before he took office in Ruijincounty. That showed the power's function in the editing process of local chronicle. So the editing those team that recorded in the local chronicle would not be true. That was also the result of the influence of power on the editing process of local chronicle.

From the analysis above, we would find that the power from the different groups would influence the editing of the local chronicle. The power would come from the officials, or the family of the officials and the will of the empire.

The funds for the editing local chronicle came from different ways. Through analysis the collection process funds, it would find that the finance would also influence the content of the local chronicle. Some of the funds came from the officials' salary, which was not very much. But some funds came from the donation from the folk in the unit of family, which was motivated by the government. Some of the funds came from the levy by the government. In the process, the family donation would change the content of the local chronicle, because the editors would bias for the family which donated more.

6. The Subjectivity of the Local Chronicle

The local chronicle, as a unique genre, was different from the other kinds of genre. The poem, fiction, prose had more literary ornamentation. The genre of legal provision, history etc. had less literary ornamentation as they focused on the exactitude. The local chronicle was in the pursue for the exactitude, but on the other hand, it had very much literary ornamentation. For the editors of it would showed off their talents, which cause the blur or even contradiction in the local chronicle.

So in Late-Qing dynasty, the famous scholar specialized in local chronicle, Zhang Xuecheng, claimed that the literati could not edit the local chronicle. He said: "When the literati wrote the articles, he would not know the exact matter in reality. They gave much embellishment in the articles. Although the articles were graceful, they would not reflect the facts. Or the facts were wonderful, but the articles would not narrate them appropriately." (Zhang, X.1788) He believed that the historians were more suitable to be the editors of local chronicle. "The literati who specialized in the poems and proses should not be talked about the special subjects such as the history and Confucian classics." (Zhang, X. 1788)

But in the editing process of local chronicle, many of the editors would be the literati specialized in poems and proses. Take the editing of *Xiangshan Local Chronicle* for example. In Ming dynasty, the special institute was established for the local chronicle editing in Xiangshancounty. The branches of the county local chronicle editing institute appeared in Qing dynasty. The editing team of *Xiangshan Local Chronicle* was composed by the officials or the scholars who achieved the titles in the empirical examination. However, in the material collecting process, they depended on the others. Besides, the fact that they were the ones specialized in the literature but not the history influenced the quality of the local chronicle. The officials and the ones who got the title from the empirical examination were all specialized in the literature. Because the empirical examination content was mainly about the literature, and weather the examinees wanted to get the titles or become the officials, they should pass the examination, so they were not specialized in the history but the literature. Of course, there were some other officials who took part in the editing of local chronicle, but they were mainly the military officials, who got the titles in the martial arts competition. It was obvious that they were unsuitable for the local chronicle editing more.

When the literati began to edit the local chronicle, they would show off their techniques of literature composition. The local chronicle's lines should be matter-of-fact. If there were many emotional words in the local chronicle, the effect of recording the fact would be influenced by such rhetorics. As a way of letting the future generations memorize the editors' names, local chronicle would

be the places in which the editors would show off their talent of literature rhetorics, because the editors were very good at literature rhetorics, which they got in the training for the empirical examination. In the different local chronicles, especially in the county local chronicle, the literature rhetorics was very obvious. The smaller of the place, the more literature rhetorics of its local chronicle. For example, as we mentioned above, the recording of character in the local chronicle would be reedited in the subsequent local chronicle. In the process, some editors would embellish the previous recording of characters with some literature rhetorics. However, the fact would be covered because of such literary embellishment.

The local chronicle seemed in the dilemma, because it was like the history, for it should record the local history honestly, but on the other hand, the editors of it would be the literati and showed off their literary talent consciously or unconsciously. So it was obvious that the local chronicle recording had much subjectivity.

7. Conclusion

The local chronicle is the important historic recording for the scholars or the ones who want to understand the local history. In the academic research, it provides many useful materials.

However, we have to notice the shortcomings of it. For the editors, one of the supposed functions of local chronicle was to propagate the Confucian ethic morality, so the selected materials in the local chronicle and the form of it would be suggested to fulfill the task. So in the purpose of the local chronicle, the materials and the writing forms of local chronicle were chosen with intention. Some recording about the fact would be banned in the local chronicle, besides, the recordings about the local history would be distorted.

The local chronicle has the features both of history and literature, because the editors of it are mostly the literati. They would show off their talent of literature rhetorics consciously or unconsciously. Even if they did not show off their talent, the literary training of them for the empirical examination made their writing style have much literary colors. The editing process of the local chronicle could not ensure the reliability of its content. The funds of the editing were collected by the government, and most of the funds came from the donations of the gentry, which was an important group composed by the ones who got the academic title in the empirical examination, or from the rich ones in the rural. The donators of the funds controlled the editing of the local chronicle, in the spheres of both content and style. They inserted some materials that benefited them or their families and deleted the materials to the disadvantage of them. So the materials were also unreliable. There are still many opinions and researches based on local chronicle, however, we should be careful about the unreliable factors of the local chronicle.

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