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The Image of Xinjiang in Ancient Texts — Interpreting the Image of Xinjiang in the Qing Dynasty Officially Compiled Local Gazetteers through the *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing*

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Abstract. In the contemporary context of globalization and regional cultural diversity, accurately understanding and interpreting the historical and cultural image of Xinjiang has become an important research topic. This study adopts a historical bibliography perspective, with the Qing Dynasty *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* as the core text, employing text analysis and comparative research methods to explore the historical construction and transformation of the image of Xinjiang. The study finds that the image of Xinjiang in the Qing official gazetteers demonstrates distinct political integration characteristics, with its narrative framework significantly differing from contemporary multicultural cognitive models. Through a multi-dimensional analysis of historical evolution, folklore, geography, and other aspects, the study reveals the mechanisms of power discourse and shifts in cultural cognitive paradigms in the construction of Xinjiang's image. The research indicates that the diachronic changes in regional images not only reflect the evolution of the socio-political context but also embody profound transformations in cultural cognitive patterns. This study provides a new academic perspective on the historical and cultural research of Xinjiang and offers significant theoretical value for contemporary frontier cultural governance.

Keywords: ancient texts, Xinjiang, local chronicles

1. Introduction

As an important part of China's far western region, Xinjiang, known as the "Northwest Gateway," occupies a unique geographical location, featuring diverse natural environments and a multicultural heritage. The history of Xinjiang can be traced back to ancient times, with the region having been under the rule of several dynasties, including the Han, Tang, Yuan, Ming, and Qing. The administrative divisions of Xinjiang have undergone significant changes across different dynasties. Ancient local gazetteers provide detailed records of the region's historical development, including important events such as rulers, wars, migrations, and other key occurrences during various dynasties.

From the Daoguang period to the eve of the Xinhai Revolution, Xinjiang experienced a turbulent ninety years, particularly in the face of significant challenges like neighboring enemies, the civil uprisings during the Tongzhi period, the establishment of the province in the Guangxu period, and the new political reforms and revolution. The evolution of Xinjiang's modern history during this time was dramatic, complex, and difficult. During this period, Qing Dynasty officials like Wang Shuxian played a crucial role, carrying the historical mission of creating a new era for Xinjiang. The *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* [1] was initiated in the thirty-third year of Guangxu (1907) and completed in the third year of Xuantong (1911), with its printing and publication by the Xinjiang Local Gazetteer Bureau using movable type. Therefore, as the last major local gazetteer compiled during the late Qing Dynasty, just before the Xinhai Revolution, *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* holds an important historical position.

The *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* systematically describes the geography, history, society, economy, customs, and administrative management of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, summarizing the achievements of Qing Dynasty gazetteer compilation and the geographical and historical research of the northwestern frontier. It clearly presents the image of the Western Regions from the perspective of the Qing Dynasty's officially compiled local gazetteers. The work is marked by a well-organized structure, rich historical materials, and the embodiment of enlightened thoughts emphasizing the well-being of the people. Its compilation, initiated in the thirty-third year of Guangxu with the establishment of the Xinjiang Local Gazetteer Bureau, was ultimately completed with the joint efforts of Wang Shunan, Song Bolu, Xu Renjian, and others.

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2. The Image of Xinjiang in Historical Evolution

2.1. Geographic Spatial Image

The Western Regions (西域) have historically been known as a distant land, inhabited by numerous ethnic groups, with continuous political and religious changes. Collecting historical materials from this area has been particularly difficult. Since the Tang Dynasty, historical documents such as *The Records of the Western Regions of the Tang Dynasty*, *Geography of Shazhou and Yizhou*, and *The Illustrated Geography of the Western Regions*, along with the *Taiping Huanyu Ji* from the Song Dynasty, have recorded details about the Western Regions [2]. By the Qing Dynasty, with the gradual easing of military conquests, both the northern and southern parts of Xinjiang were unified. The region began to implement a military-governor system and a county system, formally incorporating it into the central government's administrative framework. During the reigns of Emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong, the Qing government conducted in-depth and meticulous surveys of the geography, customs, and economic conditions of the Western Regions, accumulating a wealth of invaluable firsthand materials, which laid a solid foundation for the compilation of the *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing*.

The *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* begins by defining Xinjiang's territorial scope, stating: "Eastward extending to the Great Wall, northward blocked by Mongolia, southward connected to Tibet, and westward leaning on the Tianshan Mountains" [3]. Sections such as *The Administrative Division Records* provide detailed records of Xinjiang's administrative divisions, mountains, rivers, and transportation routes. *The Mountain Records* and *The Waterways Records* comprehensively document the natural geographical conditions, presenting the Western Regions as an expansive and geographically diverse area, an inseparable part of Chinese territory.

2.2. Political Jurisdictional Image

The *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* is a monumental work, rich in detail and breadth, recording extensive and crucial information about Xinjiang in the Qing Dynasty, including politics, economy, military, diplomacy, geography, and resources. This gazetteer is described as "exhaustively searching, collecting broadly, delving into the past and making connections, encompassing tens of thousands of miles and thousands of years of events, one by one recorded with great care" [4], totaling 116 volumes and over 2.3 million words. In terms of both volume and the breadth and depth of its content, it surpasses all previous gazetteers. Its vast temporal and spatial scope, its comprehensive content, and its approach to compilation, which balances orthodoxy and innovation, all highlight its exceptional achievements, making it a pinnacle of local chronicles and a monumental contribution to the history of gazetteer compilation. The modern scholar Liang Qichao highly praised *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* as the "rising star" among numerous provincial, prefectural, and county gazetteers, a statement that is certainly justified.

Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing: Administrative Division Records identifies the locations of various administrative divisions in Xinjiang with the capital at the center, reflecting Xinjiang's subordination to the Qing Dynasty. It meticulously records the scope of Xinjiang's administrative units, reflecting the Qing government's effective governance of the Western Regions. Politically, the Western Regions were an area under central control within the Qing Empire.

At the same time, *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* also documents a series of political institutions established by the Qing government in Xinjiang, such as the Ili General's Office and the Aksu Ministerial Office. The establishment of these institutions not only strengthened the Qing government's control over Xinjiang but also promoted social stability and economic development in the region. Through the records in *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing*, it is evident that politically, Qing Xinjiang was a highly organized and institutionalized region. The Qing government's governance of Xinjiang was reflected not only in the division of geographical space but also in the establishment and implementation of political systems. This approach to governance not only maintained stability in Xinjiang but also provided important historical lessons for future border governance.

2.3. Identity Recognition Image

In the late Qing Dynasty, China faced internal troubles and external threats, with Britain and Russia competing for territorial control over Xinjiang. *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* created two sections: *National Borders Records* and *Diplomatic Records*, which primarily document the changes in the northwestern borders and the negotiations and treaties between the Qing government and Britain and Russia. The detailed descriptions of territorial borders concerning national interests reflect the awareness of territorial sovereignty and assert that the sovereignty over the Western Regions (Xiyu) belonged to the Qing Dynasty, which could not be violated.

At the same time, *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* also thoroughly records the historical origins, cultural characteristics, and living conditions of the various ethnic groups in Xinjiang. It emphasizes that Xinjiang is an inseparable part of the great family of the Chinese nation, strengthening the sense of belonging and identification of the ethnic groups with the country. The construction of this identity recognition image not only had significant political importance at the time but also left valuable historical memories and cultural wealth for future generations. Through the records in *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing*, it is clear that, despite the

turbulent historical background of the late Qing Dynasty, Xinjiang remained loyal to and deeply connected with the country. This spiritual strength became an essential support for maintaining national unity and territorial integrity.

Professor Zhu Yuqi, one of the editors of *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing*, pointed out that before the modern history of China began, *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* could be considered an encyclopedic work that comprehensively summarized ancient Xinjiang. The book is innovative and filled with national and sovereignty consciousness, focusing on the people and livelihood, with rich material and detailed records of the present, while briefly covering the past. It not only has significant historical value but also strong practical significance. As Professor Zhu Yuqi stated, the concept of the nation-state in modern China is fully embodied in *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing*. The officials who compiled the work, such as Wang Shuzhan and others, were able to keep pace with the times during a critical period of China's modern transformation, ensuring that the new local gazetteer reflected the post-establishment period of Xinjiang and incorporated new editorial concepts. Specifically, the compilation of *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* followed the trends of the time and reflected the ideals of strengthening the country and enriching the people brought about by the late Qing reform movements.

2.4. Review of Relevant Academic Research

According to the National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences, the major project titled "Investigation and Research on Rare Historical Materials of Xinjiang during the Qing Dynasty" (11&ZD095) was approved and launched on October 25, 2011. The research team, led by Professor Zhu Yuqi from Peking University's Center for Ancient Chinese History, gathered a group of well-known scholars specializing in Qing history, Western Region history, Sino-foreign relations, bibliology, and related fields. Since the project was initiated, the research team has followed the planned execution, gradually expanding the investigation of rare historical materials in multiple languages from both domestic and overseas sources, resulting in a series of fruitful research achievements. Among these accomplishments is the compilation and study of *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing*. The project aims to deeply explore rare historical materials related to Xinjiang during the Qing Dynasty and provide the academic community with more comprehensive and accurate historical data on Xinjiang. Through the implementation of this project, a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural context of Qing Dynasty Xinjiang can be gained, providing a solid academic foundation for the development of cultural initiatives in Xinjiang in the new era.

Among the publications from this research, Professor Zhu Yuqi's *Xu Song and the Study of the Records of the Waterways of the Western Regions* [5] was released. The work includes empirical research from three aspects: "Biography of Xu Song," "Catalogue of Xu Song's Works," and "Research on *Records of the Waterways of the Western Regions*." It argues that Xu Song was not only an inheritor of traditional scholarship but also a pioneer of practical scholarship. His *Records of the Waterways of the Western Regions* [6] is the product of the historical circumstances of the Qianlong and Jiaqing periods, influenced by the academic trend of verifying facts, the social tide of applying practical knowledge, the political environment of the development of the Western Regions, the looming border threats, and the introduction of Western knowledge. It is considered a foundational work in the study of the history and geography of the Northwestern regions.

This book not only reveals Xu Song's academic contributions and intellectual trajectory but also provides a unique perspective on the historical background and value of *Records of the Waterways of the Western Regions*. Professor Zhu Yuqi's work is not only an in-depth study of Xu Song and his works but also an important advancement in the study of the Western Regions during the Qing Dynasty. Through Professor Zhu's interpretation, it becomes clearer that *Records of the Waterways of the Western Regions* is not merely a geographical work but also a valuable document reflecting various aspects of the society, politics, and culture of the time. In today's context, with the advancement of the "Belt and Road" initiative, the significance of Xinjiang continues to grow. Research on documents such as *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* and *Records of the Waterways of the Western Regions* not only helps us better understand the historical and cultural significance of Xinjiang but also provides important academic references for the development and construction of Xinjiang in the new era.

3. Conclusion

With the development of the times, *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing*, as an important historical document, has increasingly highlighted its academic value and social significance. In future research and utilization, greater emphasis should be placed on the in-depth exploration and comprehensive interpretation of *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing*. This will not only help us gain a deeper understanding of the history and culture of Xinjiang during the Qing Dynasty but also provide valuable insights for contemporary social development.

First, efforts should be made to enhance the digitalization of *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing*. Through modern technological methods, its contents should be converted into searchable and analyzable digital resources, facilitating research and utilization by scholars and the public. Secondly, thematic seminars and academic conferences could be organized, inviting experts and scholars from related fields to discuss the academic value and social significance of *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing*, thereby promoting further development of its research. Additionally, *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* can be incorporated as an important cultural resource into the educational system, allowing students to strengthen their sense of identity and pride in Chinese culture as they learn about history.

The historical value contained in *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing: Administrative Division Records* is of immense reference significance for the in-depth study of Xinjiang's history during the Qing Dynasty and for the current compilation work of local gazetteers. At the same time, given the important role of local gazetteers in governing and assisting administration, the detailed records of Qing governance in Xinjiang can also provide valuable references for contemporary governance of Xinjiang. The descriptions in *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* regarding the geography, culture, and customs of Xinjiang also serve as precious materials for understanding the region's multiculturalism. In the future, with the continued deepening of academic research and the ongoing progress of local gazetteer compilation, the value contained in *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* will be further explored and utilized. Furthermore, with the aid of modern technological methods, such as digitalization and networking, the information in *Chronicles of Xinjiang Governing* can be disseminated and shared in a more convenient and efficient manner, allowing more people to understand and love Xinjiang, contributing to the prosperity and development of the region.

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