

# The Method of Dating Language Materials from Historical Records

Chong Wang<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Literature, Journalism and Communication, Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia 010070, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: wangchong1980@126.com

## ABSTRACT

Historical records are important source of materials for Chinese history researchers. This paper uses the research methods of "original materials" and "other materials" in ancient Chinese to propose a new classification standard for determining the age of historical materials. At the same time it comes to a conclusion: the historical materials in the "recording speech" part should be divided into two categories. One is processed by the author and belongs to the corpus of the author's era. The other is the author's citation of the predecessors' classics, which should belong to the corpus of the time recorded in the historical books.

**Keywords:** Records of the Historian, Book of Han, corpus, age, identification

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is well known that the authors of most historical records lived far from the time of the events described. The records may be deleted or revised in the process of circulation. When later generations write about their predecessors, the authors inevitably had to consult numerous original materials and previous works. All these make the corpus of historical records into a complex mixture. Therefore, after determining a historical book as the research object, the first step is to verify the original text, that is, to identify the age of the corpus.

## II. DIFFERENT VIEWS ON DETERMINING THE AGE OF LANGUAGE MATERIAL FROM HISTORICAL RECORDS

At present, opinions on the dating of language material from historical records in academic circles diverse.

The first view is that all the language material in historical record is contemporary with the author. Scholars such as Zhu Qingzhi held this view. He pointed out: "Although studies have shown that Fan Ye's *Book of Later Han* is dominated by *The History of the Dong Han* and compiled by 18 books about the Later Han, which also includes many memorials to the throne and articles of the Eastern Han people, it is still considered as a literature of the Southern and Northern Dynasties in the 5 century AD. The reason is simple: the ancients did not care to preserve the original appearance of the materials they copied for the purpose

of compiling books." [1] They also hold that although the *Book of Jin* is based on many other previous books on the theme, when the book was rewritten in the early Tang Dynasty, many of its original materials were modified and polished at great length. Therefore, from the perspective of corpus, the *Book of Jin* cannot represent the appearance of the actual language of the Jin Dynasty, but can only reflect the language reality of the early Tang Dynasty.

The second view is that the corpus in historical records should belong to the period recorded. Guo Zaiyi once argued that, as for *Book of Jin* and *History of Southern Dynasties*, "Although the authors of these books lived in the Tang Dynasty, the historical facts reflected and the original materials used were all from the Six Dynasties period, so they are regarded as documents of the Six Dynasties period". [2]

The third view is that the corpus of history books should be treated separately and not uniformly. Ota Tatsuo, a Japanese scholar, once divided the literature into "simultaneous data" and "post-temporal data". [3] Simultaneous data refers to the fact that the content of a material and its appearance (i.e. text) were generated at the same time, such as oracle bones, gold stones, inscribed wooden slip, and the author's manuscripts. Post-temporal data basically refer to those materials whose appearance is produced later than the content, that is, the materials that have been rewritten and republished. According to this classification, the documents in the history books are basically "post-temporal data", which must be carefully identified before they can be used. This method provides insight for Chinese scholars. When studying *Book of Jin*, Liu

Shizhen pointed out that "historical data can be divided into two parts: recording narration and recording events. The first part can be regarded as the era of the speaker, while the second as the era of book writing." [4] Fang Yixin and Wang Yunlu share that "apart from the original materials, *Book of Later Han* and *Book of Song* should be treated as the corpus of Song and Liang Dynasty respectively in principle. The utilization of the former to discuss the evolution of the meaning of the Eastern Han Dynasty and the latter to explore the development of words of the Song Dynasty should be taken seriously. At best, they can only be used as circumstantial evidence". [5]

### III. CRITERIA TO DATING LANGUAGE MATERIAL FROM HISTORICAL RECORDS

Both the first and second viewpoints mentioned above have reasonable ingredients and certain deficiencies. The first view advocates the principle of "taking the time of writing as the standard", which is no doubt prudent, but may also lead to the neglect of a precious set of primitive corpus of the previous generation. The latter overemphasizes the primitiveness of historical corpus and ignores the possibility of the later generations of historiographers. In this way, both the first and second views will lead to the waste of corpus, which is detrimental to the study of Chinese history. In fact, the historical data should be divided into two parts: recording narration and recording events. The first part should be regarded as the corpus of the speaker's time, while the latter as the corpus of the writing period (that is, the author's time). The scope of recorded corpus should be narrowed, and the small-scale records should be renamed as "original material", and the corpus other than "original material" is also called "other materials". The following is a detailed discussion of the components of "original material" and "other materials".

The "original materials" in historical records refer to the documents of the current dynasty cited in the text and the classics of the two Han dynasties to the six dynasties cited by the records. Although they may be embellished by authors, they should in principle be identified as the work of someone who lived in the same dynasty as the event. It is not proper to treat all these materials as those of the period when books were written. The original materials include the documents of the dynasty quoted in the text, such as the imperial edicts, memorials, and articles, which cover the following parts. The first is memorials and official dispatch, covering the documents of impeaching officials, and the documents of litigation, most of which are original records without any embellishment. The second is the letters and letters home, which were quoted in the original when the author of historical records was writing. The third is ballads and proverbs.

Ballads are oral literature in nature, and singing and reciting are the basic modes of communication. Therefore, this style has a strong oral color, emphasizing the rhythm, and the rhyme of ballads and folk songs is the closest to the actual spoken language. The fourth is poetry and prose. The number of poems in historical records is high, such as Jia Yi's *Mourn for Qu Yuan* and *Funiaio Fu* in *Records of the Historian* and *Book of Han* and Sima Xiangru's *Zi Xu Fu* and *Shanglin Fu*. This part of the corpus must be quoted from the original text. The corpus must be cited from the original. The fifth is imperial edicts. Generally speaking, the imperial edicts and memorials are mostly about amnesty, recommend talent, relief and other procedural content, so they rarely reflect spoken language.

The parts other than the original materials belong to other materials, which include two categories of recording narrations and recording events. It is worth discussing that the records of narration or events should be used as the corpus of the ages recorded in historical books without specific analysis. The details are as follows.

The first is recording events. The narrative and its praise and argumentation in the historical records all belong to events. Narrative is the most important writing technique in historical books, which accounts for the largest amount of space. It is inevitable that the author will refer to and adopt many historical materials of the previous generation in his narration of historical facts. However, such reference and adoption cannot be copied blindly, and is usually written into historical books after the author's arrangement, modification and processing. Therefore, this part of corpus should be regarded as contemporary with the author of books.

The second is recording speech (dialogues between characters). The dialogues and speeches in historical books belong to recorded speech. Dialogue is similar to the language of the people at that time, because the author often consciously pays attention to the individuality and authenticity of the language when depicting the characters. The language is relatively simple and close to life, and there are some very familiar and colloquial examples. These materials may be the author's creation based on or reference to some literature. However, these materials can hardly be guaranteed to be authentic. Therefore, Fang Yixin holds that in principle, the content of the recorded narration should still be regarded as the same corpus as that of the author of historical books.

Fang Yixin's view is very enlightening, but the author disagrees with him in "recording speech". The author takes that the corpus of "recording speech" is also a complex mixture, so it is necessary to analyze it again rather than generalize it. A one-size-fits-all approach to "recording speech" may obliterate or ruin the value of this corpus.

It is well known that the records of *Book of Han* date from the first year of Emperor Gaozu of Han Dynasty (206 BC) to the fourth year of Emperor Wang Mang (AD 23), and that the period from the founding of Han by Liu Bang (206 BC) to the end of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (101 BC) completely coincides with *Records of the Historian*. However, when dealing with this historical fact, Ban Gu did not completely start from scratch, but directly quoted a lot of contents from *Records of the Historian*, which made *Records of the Historian* and *Book of Han* similar and comparable to a great extent. In addition, it was found that *Book of Han* had copied almost the whole text of more than 90 articles, such as *Sima Xiangru Biography of Records of the Historian*, *Fengshanshu Chapter of Records of the Historian*, *Wuwang Chapter of Records of the Historian*, *Hanzhangru Chapter of Records of the Historian* and *A Letter to Shaoqing Ren*. Of course, "recording speech" part is no exception. Therefore, the "recording speech" corpus can no longer be studied as the corpus of the Ban Gu period, that is, the eastern Han Dynasty, according to Fang's view, but should be used as the corpus of the Sima Qian period, that is, the Western Han Dynasty. Fang's theory is obviously not suitable for the research here.

This means that the recording speech should be divided into two categories. One is processed by the author and belongs to the corpus of the author's era. The other is the author's citation of the predecessors' classics, which should belong to the corpus of the time recorded in the historical books. Only in this way can the value of some corpus not be lost.

Finally, a summary of the criteria for dating language material from historical records. First of all, the corpus of historical books is not the product of the same time in fact. It includes the documents of the period quoted in the original texts, covering imperial edicts, memorials, ballads, proverbs, letters and poems written by the authors of the period. These "original materials" can be used as the corpus of the period recorded in historical books. Secondly, the author's critical corpus of historical events, such as praise, preface, and discourse, can be used as the corpus of the author's time. Finally, the recorded words are divided into two categories: one is the corpus of the era recorded in historical books, and the other is the corpus of the author's time, depending on the specific situation.

#### **IV. AN ANALYSIS OF THE ERA OF CORPUS IN RECORDS OF THE HISTORIAN**

The author takes *Records of the Historian* [6] as an example to analyze the age of its corpus, which is divided into two periods.

##### *A. Pre-Qin period*

When Sima Qian wrote *Records of the Historian*, he had extensively referenced and quoted more than 20 kinds of classic works such as *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, *Guoyu*, *The Book of Changes*, *Rites of Zhou*, *Book of History* and *The Book of Songs*, more than forty parts including *Guanzi*, *Yanzi*, *Lao Zi*, *Han Feizi*, *Sun Zi*, *The Analects of Confucius*, *Works of Mencius*, *Xun Zi*, and *Gongsun Long Zi*, and more than 20 kinds of historical geography and Han archives including *Anthology of Detective Stories*, *Die Ji*, *Ling Jia*, *Gong Ling*, and *Han Lv Ling*. It was because Sima Qian's extensive quotation of the group books that *Records of the Historian* were collected into a book of ancient and modern classics, and they were kept basically intact. Many lost books can only be seen in *Records of the Historian*, which is an epoch-making event in the history of Chinese culture. This part of the ancient literature contains a large number of rhymes, so it is put into a separate category, not to be confused with the rhymes of other times, in order to investigate the phonology of the pre-Qin period.

##### *B. Western Han Dynasty*

*Ban Biao Chapter of Book of Later Han* mentioned: "(Sima Qian) has one hundred and thirty chapters including biographic sketches of emperors, aristocratic family, collected biographies, the social life and institutions, and ten are absent." *Bibliography of Book of Han* writes that "*Records of the Historian* has over one hundred and thirty chapters, ten of which exist in the catalogue but are not specifically included." *Biography of Sima Qian in Book of Han* also says that there is a lack of ten. However, the ten chapters are still included in existing *Records of the Historian*, which leads to controversy in later generations. So what is the nature of the supplementary corpus in *Records of the Historian*? What age does it belong to? This requires an understanding of Chu Shaosun. Chu Shaosun was a poetic scholar of the Han Dynasty. He lived only 70 or 80 years later than Sima Qian. In this way, the phonetic differences between the two are not obvious. Therefore, the rhyming materials in Chu's supplementary text are included in this book and studied together with Sima Qian's rhymes. Most of the articles added by Chu Shaosun in *Records of the Historian* are marked Chu, so it is still easy to identify. There are also some divinatory phrases belonging to Western Han Dynasty, such as a dialogue between Wei Ping and Song Yuan Wang in *Turtle Biographies*, with thousands of words, and the whole text in rhyme, and the rhyme is very strict.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

As historical records are important source of materials for Chinese history researchers, the dating of

their corpus is often directly related to the credibility of the research results, which should be taken seriously. In the study and investigation of phonetics, grammar, vocabulary and other issues with the help of historical records, it is a must to pay attention to the inconsistencies between the original materials and other materials in books in terms of the era, so as to avoid misunderstanding.

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