



The Interplay Between Literature and Politics: An Examination of the Compilation of "Biographies of Chief Ministers Since the Jiaping Era" and the Cultural Impact of Historiographical Writing in the Ming Dynasty

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ABSTRACT

By thoroughly exploring the creation process of "Biographies of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiaping Era" and its cultural impact on historiography during the Ming Dynasty, this article reveals the profound historical responsibility and academic pursuit embodied by Wang Shizhen in this work. Influenced deeply by the "Late Seven Masters Revival Movement" in the mid to late Ming Dynasty literary scene, Wang Shizhen, as a prominent figure in this movement, made significant contributions not only in literature but also in historiography. Through a detailed analysis of "Biographies of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiaping Era," this article demonstrates how Wang Shizhen meticulously collected and rigorously verified a large number of historical materials to document the chief ministers since the Jiaping period, thereby unveiling the complexity of the political ecology and power structures of the time. Wang Shizhen, through his detailed descriptions of the chief ministers, not only recorded historical events but also expressed a profound understanding and critique of the political environment of the Ming Dynasty by narrating the relationships and political struggles among the characters involved in these events. This close integration of politics and historiography not only reflects the social realities of the time but also provides an important reference for future research. "Biographies of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiaping Era" holds a significant position in Ming Dynasty historiography, and its narrative method and academic spirit have had a far-reaching influence on later historians. Additionally, this article examines the application and influence of "Biographies of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiaping Era" in global historiography from an international perspective, emphasizing its crucial role in promoting Sino-foreign academic exchanges. Through this cross-cultural comparative study, the article aims to enhance the in-depth exchange and mutual learning between Chinese and Western academia, enriching the content and methods of global historiographical research.

Keywords: "Biographies of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiaping Era"; Historiographical Creation; Wang Shizhen; Ming Dynasty Historiography; Political Struggles

1. INTRODUCTION

During the mid to late Ming Dynasty, the "Later Seven Masters' Retro Movement," led by the renowned litterateur Wang Shizhen (1526-1590), had a profound impact on the literary circles of the time. His literary works, "Four Drafts of Yanzhou Hermit" and "Supplementary Four Drafts of Yanzhou Hermit," are vast in scale, while his "Casual Remarks on the Arts" is considered an excellent work of literary theory. In addition to his literary achievements, Wang Shizhen also made outstanding contributions to historiography. Chen Jiru praised him for possessing the talents of the two Simas (Sima Qian and Sima Guang). His historical writings, "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries Since the Jiaping Era" (hereinafter referred to as "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries") and "Collected Works of Yanshan Hall," hold significant historical and historiographical value[1-4]. In the Ming Dynasty's cabinet system, the Chief Grand Secretary was the highest official assisting the emperor in handling state affairs. Although the emperor had absolute power within the autocratic system, the complexity of state affairs required capable

officials to assist in governance[5]. During the Jiajing period, the status and power of the Chief Grand Secretary were significantly elevated. Wang Shizhen's "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" is a biographical history book that records the Chief Grand Secretaries since the Jiajing era. Through detailed biographical sketches and evaluations, it showcases the political ecology of the time. The "General Catalogue of the Complete Library of the Four Treasuries" comments on this book, stating that it "elaborates on the rights and wrongs of state affairs and the reasons for the rise and fall of virtuous and treacherous officials of the time, in a sequential and detailed manner, adhering well to historiographical principles"[6]. When compiling the "History of Ming" during the Qing Dynasty, a large amount of content from the "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" was adopted, fully demonstrating Wang Shizhen's historiographical talents. The "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" is not only an important historical source for studying the political history of the Ming Dynasty but also a crucial document for understanding Ming historiographical writing. By studying the "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries," one can delve deeply into the commonalities in historiographical writing between the Ming and Qing dynasties, and understand how historiographical creation intertwined with politics in that specific historical and social context.

As a historical biography, "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" has been primarily explored by academia from two perspectives: its historiographical value and its biographical writing. In terms of historiographical value, research includes Li Xiang's "The Historiographical Value and Limitations of 'Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries Since the Jiajing Era'"[7], Sun Weiguo's "An Examination of Wang Shizhen's 'Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries Since the Jiajing Era'"[8], and Zhao Yue and Yang Bin's "Wang Shizhen's Contribution to Historiography: A Case Study of 'Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries Since the Jiajing Era'"[9]. These studies thoroughly discuss the relationship between "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" and "History of Ming," the time of its compilation, its title, content structure, and Wang Shizhen's historiographical attitude, affirming the historiographical value of the work. In terms of biographical writing, research includes Yue Tianlei's "A Study on Historical Facts in Wang Shizhen's 'Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries'—With 'Biography of Gao Gong' as a Representative"[10] and "The Truth Behind the Dismissal of Longqing Cabinet Ministers—A Re-examination of Historical Facts in Wang Shizhen's 'Biography of Gao Gong'"[11], Wei Hongyuan's "Fiction and Non-fiction: An Interpretation of Wang Shizhen's 'Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries Since the Jiajing Era'"[12], and Chen Lirong's "A Discussion on the Negative Impact of Wang Shizhen's Moral Evaluation of Zhang Juzheng"[13]. These studies examine the accounts of figures such as Gao Gong and Zhang Juzheng in the "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries," suggesting that Wang Shizhen's personal feelings led to biases in his narration, and analyzing how historical facts were transformed into textual facts in the biographies. Overall, scholarly research on Wang Shizhen has yielded substantial results, recognizing his literary and historiographical talents and the value of his works. However, existing research predominantly focuses on the historiographical value and biographical genre analysis of the "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries," with less attention paid to the political factors involved in its creation. Therefore, further in-depth research is needed on the intertwining of historiographical creation and politics in the "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries," as well as its unique role within the political environment of the Ming Dynasty.

From the perspective of text generation, both literary and historiographical creations follow specific patterns and require a long evolution process to present a complete and well-organized work. How did "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" come into being? Was it an idea that Wang Shizhen had early on, or was it a creative desire that emerged later in his life? Did he write similar biographical works in his early years? How do Wang Shizhen's early biographies, short biographies, and poetic praises relate to the biographies in "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries"? How is this connection manifested? How can the dynamic process of the "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries," from drafts to the first draft, be examined?

This article attempts to re-evaluate the relationship between the early texts and the biographies in "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" by analyzing the connection between the "Records of Jiajing Cabinet Ministers" included in "Fengzhou Biyuan" and the "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries." It explores the narrative interconnection between the draft stage texts and the final biographies and investigates the writing practices and shifts in Wang Shizhen's historiographical concepts. The study affirms the dual value of "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" in understanding both Ming Dynasty politics and historiographical creation. Researching from this angle provides a detailed understanding of the political careers of the Chief Grand Secretaries in the mid to late Ming Dynasty, offering rich historical materials for the study of Ming political history. It also showcases Wang Shizhen's unique perspective and narrative techniques in historiographical creation, providing valuable experiences for subsequent historiographical research. Additionally, this article attempts to explore the academic value of "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" from an international perspective, analyzing its position in global historiographical studies. By comparing the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western biographical literature, the article will discuss the contributions of "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" to global political history research and emphasize its important role in promoting Sino-foreign academic exchanges.

The content structure of this article is divided into four main sections:

Theoretical Framework: This section will start by examining the intertwining of literature and politics, analyzing the political nature and the embodiment of political power in historiographical creation within "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries." Following this, it will discuss the cultural impact of historiographical creation and explore the contemporary and subsequent evaluations of "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries."

The Compilation Process of "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries".

This part will delve into the background of the compilation of "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries," including Wang Shizhen's historiographical views and the preparation of historical materials, the political environment of the late Ming Dynasty, and the historiographical trends of the time. It will analyze the text generation process, examining the relationship between "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" and Wang Shizhen's other historiographical works, as well as the evolution from drafts to the final version. Finally, it will study the chapter arrangement and narrative strategies of "Biographies of Chief Grand

Secretaries," exploring the selection and writing methods of the Chief Grand Secretaries.

Cultural Impact and Historical Evaluation. This section will evaluate the academic value of "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries," exploring its significance as a historical source and its contributions to the study of Ming political history. It will analyze the intertwining of literature and historiography within the work, discussing its stylistic innovations and comparing it with Western biographical literature to highlight its unique contributions. Finally, it will examine the evaluations of "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" by Qing and modern scholars, its place in the history of Chinese historiography, and its role in international academic exchanges, as well as its insights for Sino-foreign historical research.

Conclusion. This section will summarize the dual interpretation of the compilation process and cultural impact of "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries," providing a detailed analysis of the intertwining of literature and politics. It will conclude with a forecast for future research, suggesting further exploration of the application and influence of "Biographies of Chief Grand Secretaries" in global historiographical studies.

2. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRENDS AND THE PROLIFERATION OF PRIVATE HISTORIES IN LATE MING DYNASTY

In the Ming Dynasty, the trend of literary antiquarianism was prevalent, yet the attention given to antiquarianism in the field of historiography was comparatively minimal. The period witnessed a flourishing of private historical writings, with many historians adhering to the traditional formats of historical compilation while also introducing innovations. This led to the emergence of a diverse array of private historical formats, including biographical annals, chronicle format, general histories, records of words and deeds, and note-style histories[14]. Qian Maowei categorized traditional Chinese historiography into three paradigms: narrative historiography represented by Sima Qian's "Records of the Grand Historian" (Shiji), moralistic historiography represented by Song-Ming moralistic historiography, and evidential research historiography represented by Qian-Jia historiography. Wang Shizhen, who lived during the late mid-Ming period, found himself in an era marked by the clash between moralistic historiography and narrative historiography. He advocated for a return to classical literary styles and introduced innovations in the field of historiography. From the early to mid-Ming period, narrative historiography was largely neglected, with moralistic historiography receiving more attention from historians[15]. During the Ming Dynasty, official historiography adhered to the veritable records (shilu) tradition. However, the credibility of the national histories compiled during this period was insufficient and did not gain widespread recognition.

Wang Shizhen frequently criticized the deficiencies in the compilation of the national history of his dynasty. He argued that the compilation of the national history was often influenced by the personal preferences and biases of the compilers, leading to issues such as inappropriate editing, failure to investigate errors, and deliberate omissions due to taboos. In the latter half of the mid-Ming period, the writing of private histories became a widespread trend, resulting in the production of numerous historical works concerning both past and contemporary events. Tan Qian mentioned in "Guo Que" that "outside of the veritable records, the accounts of private historians are so numerous that they fill libraries" (Tan Qian, "Guo Que," "Yili"). Xie Guozhen, in his "Revised Examination of Late Ming Historical Works," listed many private historical works of the Ming Dynasty, highlighting the prolific nature of historical writing during that time. Ming historians, through the writing of private histories, reflected the complex factional struggles and court dynamics of the Ming court, critiqued contemporary figures and events, and expressed their political views. These private historical works can be broadly categorized into two types: histories of previous dynasties and contemporary histories. Histories of previous dynasties primarily involved the revision or continuation of the histories of the Song and Yuan dynasties, such as Wu Liu's "Shi Lei," Deng Yuanxi's "Han Shi," Chen Bangzhan's "Song Shi Ji Shi Ben Mo," and Xue Yingqi's "Song Yuan Tong Jian." In comparison to the histories of previous dynasties, Ming historians showed greater enthusiasm and a higher level of activity in writing contemporary histories, resulting in a large number of such works. Qian Maowei summarized five reasons for the flourishing compilation of contemporary private histories in the latter half of the mid-Ming period: "First, the widespread dissemination of the veritable records of the Ming emperors facilitated private historical writing. Second, the failure of the official historiographical activities organized by the government during the mid-Wanli period stimulated private efforts in contemporary historiography. Third, the influence of practical statecraft thought. Fourth, the relaxation of political restrictions created a favorable environment for private historical writing. Fifth, the development of the publishing industry also contributed to the prosperity of contemporary historical compilation by Ming authors"[16].

Amidst strong disappointment with the compilation of the national history, the latter half of the mid-Ming period saw a burgeoning trend of private historical writing. The numerous contemporary historical works that emerged during this time were not only plentiful in number but also varied in format, each with its unique characteristics. The biographical annal format included works such as Zheng Xiao's "Wu Xue Bian," He Qiaoyuan's "Ming Shan Cang," and Jiao Hong's "Guo Chao Xian Zheng Lu." The chronicle format included Tan Qian's "Guo Que," Xue Yingqi's "Xian Zhang Lu," and Chen Jian's "Huang Ming Tong Ji." The notable ministers' records format included Xiang Dushou's "Jin Xian Bei Yi," Wang Shizhen's "Huang Ming Ming Chen Yan Xing Lu," and Wu Boyu's "Nei Ge Ming Chen Shi Lue." Despite some of these private historical writings having flaws such as "errors due to hearsay, biases in format, or omissions in records," there were also many outstanding works. Examples include Wang Shizhen's "Yan Shan Tang Bie Ji" and "Shou Fu Zhuan," Chen Jian's "Huang Ming Tong Ji Ji Yao," Zheng Xiao's "Wu Xue Bian" and "Jin Yan," and Tan Qian's "Guo Que." These works have been regarded by later scholars as important sources for studying the political history of the Ming Dynasty[17-19].

An emphasis on historiographical practice is one of the key characteristics of traditional Chinese historians. Throughout history, historians have invested considerable effort in the compilation of historical texts and the innovation of formats. As a result, different dynasties have left behind a vast array of richly detailed and diverse historiographical works. However, the

exploration of historiographical theory has not kept pace with practical achievements. Few scholars have specifically explored the evolution and innovation of historiographical formats across different dynasties. Ming scholars, in particular, were more focused on practical innovation and application in historiography than on theoretical exploration and summary. Although the historiographical works compiled by the Ming scholars are numerous and vast, they have often been overlooked by the academic community due to various external reasons. Huang Zongxi criticized the proliferation of private histories during the Ming Dynasty. Gu Yanwu discussed the issue of the veritable records from the early Ming to the mid-Wanli period being kept secret and not widely circulated. Zhang Dai pointed out the lack of authenticity in the national, family, and unofficial histories of the Ming Dynasty. Qian Qianyi mentioned the three fallacies of Ming private histories. The compilers of the Siku Quanshu catalog noted in their preface that Ming historiography was "redundant and excessive, inevitably leading to many contradictions." Since modern times, scholars have begun to pay attention to the biases in Ming historiography. Xie Guozhen wrote "Revised Examination of Late Ming Historical Works" and "Records from Jiang-Zhe Visits," systematically evaluating and correctly assessing Ming historiography. Scholars such as Yang Yixiang, Zhai Lindong, and Xiang Yannan have also conducted systematic reviews and provided accurate evaluations of Ming historiography.

Wang Shizhen's historiographical achievements continue to shine brightly. The compilers of the Siku Quanshu remarked: "Wang Shizhen, inheriting the literary legacy of his family and being well-versed in court regulations, was also able to extensively read and comprehend a wide range of books, thus gaining a broad understanding of historical narratives and past events. Therefore, his writings are quite detailed and thorough... his major points are credible." Qian Maowei noted, "During the Ming and Qing eras, Wang Shizhen's historiography was consistently held in high regard." The historical writings of Wang Shizhen and his accomplishments in the field of historiography indeed merit in-depth examination.

3. AN EXAMINATION OF THE COMPILATION PROCESS OF "BIOGRAPHY OF THE CHIEF MINISTER"

3.1. Preparatory Work: Wang Shizhen's Long-cherished Aspiration for Historiography and His Compilation of Historical Sources

Wang Shizhen dedicated himself to writing reliable histories from a young age and completed several historical works in his later years. Mr. Gu Cheng, in "Wang Shizhen's Historiography," proposes that Wang Shizhen's commitment to writing contemporary history stemmed from two primary reasons: first, the Ming Dynasty's official historiographers did not compile national histories, the veritable records were not disseminated, and they often contained deliberate omissions and flattering falsehoods. This led Wang Shizhen to lament that "the Ming Dynasty's governance was outstanding, but its historiography has been neglected." Second, Wang Shizhen placed great importance on contemporary history as a means to express his political ideals and viewpoints. Wang Shizhen stated: "From a young age, I aspired to write history, and therefore collected a vast amount of material, including court records, local gazetteers, and anecdotes about notable figures." He engaged in governmental and literary activities in his early years, and after experiencing setbacks in middle age, he resumed his historiographical endeavors to fulfill his early aspirations.

Since Sima Qian's "Records of the Grand Historian" (Shiji) first established the biographical annal format, historians have pursued the ideal of "investigating the interactions between heaven and humanity, understanding the changes from ancient to modern times, and establishing one's own school of thought." In his literary pursuits, Wang Shizhen sought a return to classical styles, and his historiographical work was also influenced by Sima Qian. He frequently emulated Sima Qian's "The Grand Historian says" format in his historical writings, using phrases such as "The External Historian says," "The Unofficial Historian says," and "The Wild Historian says." Additionally, he employed the "mutual reference" narrative technique found in the "Records of the Grand Historian"[20-21].

Wang Shizhen proposed the "Three Histories Mutual Verification Method," which involved the cross-examination of national history, family history, and unofficial history. He believed that the records of the national history documenting institutions and rituals were indispensable, that unofficial histories, which investigate rights and wrongs and omit taboos, were necessary, and that family histories, which praise clans and record official achievements, were also essential[22-24]. Wang argued that if family histories praised questionable figures, they should not be criticized, and if unofficial histories criticized questionable figures, they should not be defended. He maintained that conflicting accounts, if both had evidence, should be preserved. This method was adopted by later scholars, such as Zhou Zhigang in "Errors in Historical Records" and Qian Qianyi in "Verification of the Veritable Records of the Hongwu Emperor."

Through his interactions with Xu Jie, the Grand Secretary during the Jiajing reign, Wang Shizhen obtained many valuable historical materials, which laid the foundation for his writing of "Biographies of the Grand Secretaries." He transcribed the veritable records and collected unofficial histories, family genealogies, and anecdotal records, compiling them into volumes and eventually writing "Critical Examination of Historical Records." He also compiled works such as "Collections of Ming Unofficial Histories," "Biographies of Eminent Ming Officials," "Collection of Imperial Edicts," "Records of the Ming Court," "Miscellaneous Records of Yan Shan Hall," and "Accounts of Unusual Events in the Ming Court"[25]. In his later years, due to health reasons, he compiled the valuable parts of his published and unpublished manuscripts into a hundred-volume collection called "Supplementary Collections of Yan Shan Hall." After his death, many of his manuscripts were compiled and published by his disciples or booksellers, including "Biographies of the Grand Secretaries," which recorded the biographies of the Grand Secretaries from the Jiajing to the mid-Wanli period and served as important historical material for studying the political system and the evolution of the cabinet during the Ming Dynasty[26-30].

3.2. Historiographical Endeavors: "Yanshan Hall Collection" and "Biography of the Chief Minister"

Wang Shizhen deeply felt the severe problem of inaccurate records in the national history since the early Ming Dynasty and aspired to compile a reliable contemporary history. However, he faced numerous contradictions: he was neither an official historian nor had he entered the historiographical office, so his historical works could only be circulated as private histories, making it difficult to gain official recognition and uncertain whether they would be accepted by future generations. As Chen Wenzhu said, "Yuanmei (Wang Shizhen) was a remarkable talent, yet he never entered the historiographical office. Witnessing the court affairs, he felt compelled to comment, despite the hidden fears of repercussions[31]. Thus, from the imperial archives to eunuchs, he documented both good and bad without holding back, hoping for future scholars to judge." This vividly portrays Wang Shizhen's conflicting mindset. Despite these challenges, in his later years, Wang Shizhen still created the "Supplementary Collections of Yan Shan Hall" and "Biographies of the Grand Secretaries."

Wang Shizhen found himself in a period of historiographical transformation during the late mid-Ming Dynasty. His historiographical works were marked by a variety of styles and approaches. Qian Maowei noted that historiographical textual criticism in the Ming Dynasty began in the early Wanli period, with prominent figures and works including Wang Shizhen's "Critical Examination of Historical Records," Hu Yinglin's "Four-Part Distinctions of Spurious Works," and Zhou Zhigang's "Distinctions of Historical Records." Wang Shizhen's early works, such as "Continued Drafts of Yan Zhou Shan Ren," were narrative historiography, while his later works, like "Critical Examination of Historical Records," reflected textual criticism. This indicates that his historiographical concepts were complex, combining both narrative historiography and textual criticism in theory and practice[32]. During his creative process, Wang Shizhen recognized certain unavoidable issues in contemporary historiography. He realized that if historians solely adhered to traditional narrative formats, the plethora of contemporary historical writings would fall into a cycle of imitation and plagiarism. While pursuing a return to classical styles, Wang Shizhen also sought innovation. He attempted to establish a new format, as exemplified by the "Supplementary Collections of Yan Shan Hall," which he termed the "Separate Collection Format." In the preface, Chen Wenzhu mentioned, "This records the customs and practices of our dynasty, comparable to the veritable records of a generation." In his own preface, Wang Shizhen explained, "Why is it called a separate collection? It contains nothing pertaining to Confucian classics or trivial skills, hence it is named a separate collection." Xu Shoufang noted, "Ming literati's views on literature still followed the traditional perspectives of ancient times. They regarded all written records and discussions, that is, all documents, as literature." This reflects the broader literary context within which Wang Shizhen's historiographical work was situated, blending traditional reverence for classical forms with a drive for innovative scholarly contributions[33].

"The Supplementary Collections of Yan Shan Hall" comprises a total of one hundred volumes. Volumes 1 to 19 are in the form of miscellaneous notes, covering a wide range of topics such as court protocols, notable events involving emperors and ministers, anecdotes about famous figures, and ethnic relations. Volumes 20 to 30 contain "Critical Examination of Historical Records." Volumes 31 to 36 document the genealogies of Ming emperors and the situations of the royal clans. Volumes 37 to 64 consist of "Tables," divided into seventy-two categories, with the "Chronological Table of Grand Secretaries" being a significant reference for the "Chronological Table of Prime Ministers" in the later compilation of the "History of Ming." Volumes 65 to 100 are all titled "Examinations." This collection, encompassing various formats such as notes, tables, and examinations, appears eclectic but forms part of Wang Shizhen's own historiographical system[34-35]. It is a detailed compendium of Ming Dynasty historical materials. Many scholars believe that "The Supplementary Collections of Yan Shan Hall" was essentially Wang Shizhen's preparation for compiling a comprehensive history of the Ming Dynasty. The collection includes historical events from the Jiajing, Longqing, and Wanli reigns, with significant overlap with "Biographies of the Grand Secretaries," allowing for cross-referencing. Wang Shizhen's work on this collection reflects his innovative approach to historiography, blending traditional formats with new methods to create a comprehensive and detailed record of Ming history. The meticulous documentation and diverse formats in "The Supplementary Collections of Yan Shan Hall" serve as invaluable resources for the study of Ming Dynasty politics, court affairs, and historical narratives.

"Biographies of the Grand Secretaries" represents Wang Shizhen's innovative attempt at compiling the section on the Grand Secretaries in the official history of the Ming Dynasty. Following the Jiajing reign, the power and status of the Grand Secretaries rapidly increased. In his later years, having experienced personal loss and significant changes in his life, Wang Shizhen's mindset and thoughts underwent substantial transformation. "Biographies of the Grand Secretaries" was written after the tenth year of the Wanli reign and exhibits a high level of scholarly rigor. Wang adopted a straightforward and candid approach, presenting each Grand Secretary with dual perspectives, highlighting both their merits and flaws. In the preface to "Biographies of the Grand Secretaries," Wang Shizhen explained his motivation for writing this work: "The founding emperor abolished the position of Prime Minister, establishing this as a fundamental law, emphasizing its importance and the grave consequences of its abolition. However, although the title was avoided, the actual power was still exercised, eventually leading to a situation where it became irreplaceable. Matters of state could not be decided alone, wisdom was not constant, and those in power inevitably had someone to rely on, creating an inevitable trend." In "Collected Works of Yan Zhou Shan Ren," Wang Shizhen discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the annalistic and biographical formats: "There are two main schools of historical writing. The first is the annalistic school, with Zuo Qiuming's 'Zuo Zhuan' as the best example; the second is the biographical school, with Sima Qian's 'Records of the Grand Historian' as the best example. The annalistic approach focuses on events, but is constrained by them and often overlooks individuals, leading to brevity and lack of comprehensiveness. The biographical approach focuses on individuals, but is constrained by them, leading to repeated narratives and excessive detail."

The "Biographies of Chief Ministers" holds significant historical source value in the Qing Dynasty's compilation of the "History of Ming." Wan Ming pointed out that Wan Sitong's "Draft History of Ming" drew on the "Biographies of Chief Ministers" for the writing of certain important events. Wang Hongxu's "Draft History of Ming by Hengyun Hermit" adopted the writing sequence and structure of the "Biographies of Chief Ministers." Zhang Tingyu's "History of Ming" was revised based on Wang's draft with minimal changes. The documentary and historical value of the "Biographies of Chief Ministers" is beyond doubt.

Although Wang Shizhen was unable to complete his plan to write the history of Ming, the "Biographies of Chief Ministers," with its rich historical materials and unique documentary value, still became one of the important historical sources for the Qing Dynasty's compilation of the "History of Ming."

4. CULTURAL RESONANCE AND HISTORICAL EVALUATION

4.1. The Academic Value of "Biography of the Chief Minister"

For any historian, their literary and historical concepts and ideas are constantly evolving. This evolution can occur with changes in life experiences, often resulting in shifts in perspectives and thoughts from youth to middle age and into old age. The transition from "Records of the Ministers of the Jiajing Era" to "Biographies of Chief Ministers" not only reflects the differences in content between the two works but also showcases the dynamic evolution of Wang Shizhen's political and historical concepts as well as his biographical writing practices. With the continuous advancement in his official positions and the accumulation of experiences, Wang Shizhen, through deep interactions with cabinet ministers, gained a deeper understanding of the actual workings of the cabinet and the intrigues among the ministers. The closer he got to the core power circle of the Ming dynasty, the more likely his understanding of politics and personnel would be influenced.

From the perspective of the writer, the focus on the biographical subjects in the transition from "Records of the Ministers of the Jiajing Era" to "Biographies of Chief Ministers" primarily reflects Wang Shizhen's evolving understanding of the roles of the chief ministers versus the ordinary cabinet ministers. If, in his youth, Wang Shizhen had an inkling of the differences between the chief ministers and the regular cabinet ministers, by his later years, he had developed a much deeper understanding of the unique status and position of the chief ministers. This understanding stemmed from the frustration of being unable to redress the injustice suffered by his father, despite his efforts, and from his interactions with chief ministers such as Xu Jie, Zhang Juzheng, and Shen Shixing. Over nearly thirty years, Wang Shizhen's personal experiences revealed to him the exalted status and immense power held by the chief ministers at the political core. These experiences subtly but profoundly influenced his political views, which in turn affected his biographical writing practices.

Furthermore, in his later years, Wang Shizhen's grasp of the political landscape became more accurate, and his understanding of the cabinet deepened. "Records of the Ministers of the Jiajing Era" was roughly completed around the 31st year of the Jiajing reign. At that time, Wang Shizhen held the position of Assistant Director in the Ministry of Justice and was promoted to Director the following year. During this period, Wang Shizhen had not yet approached the central power core of the cabinet and had few opportunities to interact with its members. Xu Jie, with whom he had some interaction, was still biding his time, and Zhang Juzheng, Shen Shixing, and Wang Xijue had not yet risen to prominence. "The Biographies of Chief Ministers" was likely completed after the 13th year of the Wanli reign. By this time, Wang Shizhen was in his later years, and both his status and position had significantly changed, bringing him closer to the core power circle. He had developed close relationships with figures like Xu Jie, Shen Shixing, and Wang Xijue. Although Xu Jie had retired during the Longqing reign, his extensive experience in the cabinet and the wealth of historical memorials in his possession became important materials for Wang Shizhen in writing "The Biographies of Chief Ministers."

With the growth in age, the accumulation of experiences, and changes in life attitudes, Wang Shizhen's views on the same individuals gradually transformed. In his youth, Wang Shizhen's opinions on cabinet ministers were relatively subjective and emotionally charged. In "Records of the Ministers of the Jiajing Era," his evaluations of several ministers were emotionally driven, reflecting a personality that was clear in its likes and dislikes. However, in "Biographies of Chief Ministers," his evaluations of the chief ministers became more balanced and fair. For example, in "Records of the Ministers of the Jiajing Era," he described Zhang Fuming as "narrow-minded and often in conflict with others, despised by his fellow villagers." In contrast, in "Biographies of Chief Ministers," he changed his tone: "Born with exceptional qualities, his actions were extraordinary. As he grew older, he became distinguished in appearance, with a handsome beard, and possessed the demeanor of a great man." Similarly, his evaluation of Yang Tinghe shifted from the early "stubborn and liked to make others yield" to "calm and meticulous by nature, his writing was concise and methodical."

This transformation not only reflects changes in Wang Shizhen's character but also demonstrates his maturity and thoughtfulness in biographical writing. In his early years, Wang Shizhen often highlighted individuals' character flaws alongside their strengths, displaying a fearless courage. In contrast, in his later years, he became more peaceful and reserved. Wang Shizhen once mentioned in a letter to his friend Zhang Jianfu that he had "four faults," one of which was the contentiousness brought about by his love for writing: "I love to write, but my writings cannot always hide or avoid the truth, and sometimes I hold a critical view." This statement further illustrates the shift in his thinking in his later years, with a greater emphasis on impartiality and balance in historical facts.

4.2. The Interplay Between Literature and Politics

Historical writing in the Ming dynasty was not merely an act of recording history; it also had profound political intentions. Wang Shizhen's "Biographies of Chief Ministers" is a quintessential example of this, where documentation and politics are closely intertwined. The writings not only had to reflect historical facts but also had to conform to the political environment and power structures of the time. In creating the "Biographies of Chief Ministers," Wang Shizhen had to strike a balance between being faithful to historical facts and expressing his personal political views.

The selection of materials and the narrative in "Biographies of Chief Ministers" fully embody its political nature. Wang Shizhen was deeply influenced by the political environment when recording individuals and describing events. During the mid-to-late Ming dynasty, factional strife was intense, and the chief ministers of the cabinet played crucial roles in these political

struggles. By documenting the lives and deeds of these chief ministers, Wang Shizhen was not merely compiling history; he was also conveying his evaluations of these figures and their political actions. For example, when describing Zhang Juzheng, he affirmed his reform achievements while also criticizing his autocratic behavior. This contradictory narrative reflects Wang Shizhen's complex stance on political evaluation.

The structure of the chapters and the narrative strategies also reveal Wang Shizhen's political attitude. Through the arrangement and detailed treatment of different chief ministers' biographies, he implied his assessment of these historical figures' importance and political influence. This method of expressing political views through documentary narrative made "Biographies of Chief Ministers" not only a historical record but also a document with political significance.

Political power in historical writing is not only directly reflected through the content but also indirectly conveyed through the form and structure of the documents. In his creation of the "Biographies of Chief Ministers," Wang Shizhen meticulously designed the chapters to subtly express his understanding and attitude toward the Ming dynasty's political environment. For certain key events and figures, he used detailed narration and commentary to convey his views on the political situation of the time. When describing the political struggles during the Wanli era, he not only recorded the political actions of the chief ministers but also used their successes and failures to reflect the shifts in political power and the complex political relationships. Through these methods, Wang Shizhen was not merely recording historical events and figures; he was also engaging in political discourse through historical narration.

The Biography of the Chief Minister held significant influence both during its time and in later periods. It not only provided subsequent historians with a wealth of historical materials but also offered an important perspective for studying Ming dynasty politics. The complex relationship between literature and politics reflects not only Wang Shizhen's personal political stance and historical views but also reveals the pervasive political issues in historical writing during the Ming dynasty.

4.3. Cultural Impact of Historiographical Writing

The Biography of the Chief Minister played a significant role not only in the political environment of the Ming Dynasty but also had a profound impact on the cultural and academic fields. Wang Shizhen's work not only documented historical events but also reflected and critiqued the society and culture of his time. Through *The Biography of the Chief Minister*, he aimed to influence contemporary and future readers' understanding of Ming politics and society, with this cultural impact manifesting on multiple levels.

In the historiographical field of the time, *The Biography of the Chief Minister* attracted wide attention. As an important historical biography, the work showcased Wang Shizhen's unique perspective and profound knowledge in historical writing. He employed extensive historical materials, demonstrating rigorous scholarly attitude and excellent evidentiary skills. This academic spirit not only influenced contemporary historical research but also set an example for later scholars. Wang Shizhen's *The Biography of the Chief Minister* held a significant place in Ming historiography, with its research methods and narrative strategies having a lasting impact on subsequent historians. Through detailed descriptions of the chief ministers, *The Biography of the Chief Minister* revealed the complexities of the Ming political system and social structure. This profound political and social analysis was not just a record of historical facts but also a critique and reflection on contemporary social issues. By describing the successes and failures of these political figures, Wang Shizhen exposed the brutal power struggles and the flaws in the political system. His work served not only as a historical record but also as political commentary. Through the analysis of historical events, Wang Shizhen expressed his views on the Ming political environment. This critical thinking was of great significance in the cultural context of the time, prompting reflection and improvement of existing systems.

The cultural impact of *The Biography of the Chief Minister* extended beyond historiography to the field of literature. As a historical biography, it possessed not only historical value but also literary merit. Wang Shizhen used rich literary techniques in the book, vividly portraying historical figures and events, leading to high literary acclaim. This literary approach to historical writing enriched Ming literature and provided new materials and inspiration for later literary creations. Through its unique narrative style and profound ideological content, *The Biography of the Chief Minister* became an important part of Ming literature.

The Biography of the Chief Minister also played a significant role in the cultural heritage of later generations. Scholars from the Qing Dynasty to the modern era have studied *The Biography of the Chief Minister* not only as a means of researching Ming Dynasty history but also as a reflection on Ming culture and society. Through the study of this work, later scholars have been able to gain insights into historical facts of the Ming Dynasty and draw wisdom from it to reflect on social issues of both past and present times. This cultural heritage has rendered *The Biography of the Chief Minister* not just an important historical document but also a cultural legacy that provides rich intellectual resources for future generations.

4.4. Comparative Study of Historiography in Eastern and Western Traditions

The Biography of the Chief Minister is an important historical biography from the Ming Dynasty that has had a profound impact in both Chinese and international academic circles. Analyzing this work from an international perspective can provide a more comprehensive understanding of its status and significance in global historiography and literary studies.

The Biography of the Chief Minister offers rich comparative material for cross-cultural studies. Western biographical literature often emphasizes the narrative of individual heroes and personal struggles, highlighting characters' perseverance and achievements in adversity, reflecting the values of individualism and heroism in Western culture. In contrast, Wang Shizhen's *The Biography of the Chief Ministers* showcases the unique approach of Eastern historiography in handling historical figures and events. It not only focuses on individual achievements but also on the impact of the political environment on individuals and the complexities of power struggles. This difference reflects the divergent historical and literary perspectives of Eastern and Western cultures and provides new perspectives for cross-cultural research.

Through meticulous descriptions and complex emotional expressions, Wang Shizhen demonstrates the role and influence of individuals within the political power structure. In his depiction of Zhang Juzheng, he not only records his reform achievements but also criticizes his autocratic behavior. This multi-dimensional evaluation method gives *The Biography of the Chief Minister* a deeper level of thoughtfulness and literary quality. While Western biographical literature also features multi-dimensional character portrayals, it often emphasizes personal moral qualities and heroic actions. Comparative studies can deepen the understanding of *The Biography of the Chief Minister* and promote the exchange and mutual learning between Chinese and Western literature and historiography.

Wang Shizhen employs narrative perspective shifts and multi-layered narrative structures to showcase the complexity and diversity of historical events. When describing Zhang Juzheng's reforms, he not only documents the implementation process but also, through the perspectives of different individuals, reveals the practical effects and reactions to these policies. This multi-dimensional narrative approach enhances the depth and breadth of the work and offers methodological insights for global historical research. In comparison, the linear narratives and single-perspective recordings common in Western historiography are relatively lacking in comprehensiveness. This comparison of narrative strategies can help expand the methods and horizons of global historical research.

Wang Shizhen's use of extensive historical materials, rigorous verification, and detailed organization in his book demonstrates his academic spirit. This historiographical method holds a significant place in Chinese historical research and provides useful references for the international academic community. Modern scholars can draw from the methods of historical verification and narrative strategies in *The Biography of the Chief Minister* to enrich the content and methods of global historical research. Especially in the context of globalization, with increasingly frequent cross-cultural academic exchanges, Wang Shizhen's historiographical methods offer valuable resources and insights for global historical research.

Wang Shizhen's use of literary techniques infuses his historical record with vividness and appeal. This fusion of historiography and literature not only enriched Ming Dynasty literary and historiographical creation but also provided future generations with a valuable cultural heritage. *The Biography of the Chief Minister* demonstrates the unique charm of the Eastern literary tradition through its combination of literary and historiographical qualities. Compared with historical novels and biographical works in Western literature, *The Biography of the Chief Minister*, with its unique narrative style and intellectual depth, offers rich comparative material for global literary studies.

5. CONCLUSION

This article conducts a detailed exploration of the process of compiling *The Biography of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiajing Reign* and its cultural impact on Ming Dynasty historiography, arriving at several important conclusions:

Firstly, Wang Shizhen demonstrated a high level of historical responsibility and academic pursuit during the compilation of *The Biography of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiajing Reign*. Through meticulous collection and rigorous verification of a vast amount of historical materials, he not only provided valuable historical resources for future generations but also showcased his unique perspective and narrative skills in historical writing. Future research should further excavate the underexplored historical materials and character details in *The Biography of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiajing Reign* to uncover more historical truths and academic values.

Secondly, in the intertwining of literature and politics, Wang Shizhen revealed the complexities of the Ming political system and power structure through detailed descriptions of the chief ministers. He not only recorded historical events but also, by narrating the relationships and political struggles among the characters involved in these events, expressed a profound understanding and critique of the Ming political environment. This close integration of politics and historiography is both a true reflection of the social realities of the time and an important reference for future research. Future studies should further explore the political intentions embedded in the literature and their impact on historical narratives.

Thirdly, from the perspective of historiographical creation, *The Biography of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiajing Reign* holds an important position in Ming historiography, with its narrative methods and academic spirit having a far-reaching influence on later historians. Wang Shizhen's multi-dimensional narratives and detailed verification provide a complete and rich historiographical model for future generations. Future historiographical research can draw from *The Biography of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiajing Reign*, further strengthening the multi-angle analysis of historical events and characters, and emphasizing the extensive collection and rigorous verification of historical materials to enhance the depth and breadth of historiographical research.

Lastly, from an international perspective, *The Biography of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiajing Reign* as a significant historical biography from the Ming Dynasty holds an important position not only in Chinese historiography but also provides rich material and reference for global historical research. By comparing the differences and similarities between Chinese and Western biographical literature and historiographical creation, one can more comprehensively understand the unique value and contribution of *The Biography of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiajing Reign*. Future research should further explore the application and impact of *The Biography of the Chief Ministers Since the Jiajing Reign* in global historiography, particularly its important role in cross-cultural exchanges and academic borrowings. Through such cross-cultural comparative research, it is possible to promote in-depth exchange and mutual learning between Chinese and Western academic circles, enriching the content and methods of global historiographical research.

DECLARATIONS

Data Availability

All data analyzed in this study are available on request from the authors.

Declarations

Ethical Approval Not required.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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