DOCUMENTING THE EARLIEST CHINESE JOURNALS

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【Abstract】

According to various authoritative sources, the English word “journal” was first used in the 16th century, but the existence of the journal in its original meaning as a daily record can be traced back to Acta Diurna (Daily Events) in ancient Roman cities as early as 59 B.C. This article documents the first appearance of Chinese daily records that were much earlier than 59 B.C.

The evidence of the earlier Chinese daily records came from some important archaeological discoveries in the 1970’s, but they were also documented by Sima Qian (145 B.C. – 85 B.C.), the grand historian of the Han Dynasty imperial court. Sima’s lifetime contribution was the publication of Shi Ji (史記) (The Grand Scribe’s Records, the Records hereafter). The Records is a book of history of a grand scope. It encompasses all Chinese history from 30th century B.C. through the end of the second century B.C. in 130 chapters and over 525,000 Chinese characters. The Records document the early Chinese history from 3000 B.C. to 800 B.C. in a legendary dateless style. In contrast, the period after 721 B.C. has dates and chronological tables, largely based on the Spring and Autumn Annals (春秋鈞) (the Annals hereafter) and more than 80 other daily records.

The Annals started between 800-700 B.C. and ended in 479 B.C., shortly before the death of its compiler – Confucius. This should be considered the first journal ever recorded in China and probably in human history. The Annals was a daily record of court events in the state of Lu, which existed at least by 721 B.C. Although states other than Lu might have similar daily records in the same time period, the Annals was the most complete and most well known due to its editor and compiler – Confucius and another important early Chinese narrative work called Zuo Zuan (左傳), a commentary on the Annals. The two sources were documented as one – Zuo’s Spring and Autumn Annals (左氏春秋) by various Chinese classical works later on. It is worth noting that both the Records and the Annals were written in the same Chinese characters that are still being used in Taiwan today and in Mainland China as recent as 1949, (a simplified version of characters has been used in Mainland China since 1949, but most people can still recognize the older version characters.)
INTRODUCTION

The origin of the word journal can be traced back to the 15th century according to the online Merriam-Webster's dictionary <http://www.m-w.com/>. It originally meant a daily record of double-entry bookkeeping or simply an account of day-to-day events. The Oxford English Dictionary[1] states something similar and records the first use of the word "journal" as a day-book in 1540. The earlier edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica[2] lists the first use of journal as the official record of House of Lords beginning in 1509. However, the existence of the journal in the concept of a daily record was far earlier than the appearance of the word "journal". According to Encyclopedia Britannica Online[3], Julius Caesar originated a daily newspaper called Acta Diurna (Daily Events) dating from 59 B.C. in ancient Rome. Handwritten copies of this early journal were posted in prominent places in Rome and in the provinces with the clear intention of providing the populace official information. The Roman Senate had another journal "Acta Senatus" (Proceedings of the Senate) around the same time, but it was not a daily journal.

China also had its official daily newspaper called Di-Pao, or reports of court affairs, which circulated among civil servants for more than two thousand years. Huang stated that Di-Pao was the earliest Chinese hand-written newspaper, and it first appeared around 200 B.C. in Han Dynasty (202 B.C. - 220 A.D.)[4]. Even though no specimen has survived, the circulation of Di-Pao was documented in Han Shu (The History of the Former Han Dynasty) around 30-90 A.D.[5].

Some scholars argued that the first daily records came from Sumerian written materials around 3000 B.C. Kramers notes that more than ninety-five percent of all the Sumerian tablets are economic in character[6]. Indeed, the early Sumerian’s tablets were mostly tallies, accounts and records relating to personal property and temple business. Most of the pictograms used in the tablets can only denote things, but cannot make statements and convey thoughts. Other scholars have argued that the first serial was from ancient Egypt. In his book Serial Publications, Osborn stated in 1980, by citing Egyptian history scholar Breasted, that “possibly the earliest serial was represented, some 4,700 years ago, by the annals transcribed on tombs of the first-dynasty kings of Egypt[7].” The “first-dynasty” must be a typographical error in the third edition of Osborn’s book, since the First and the Second Dynasties of Egypt were from 3400-2980 B.C., and 4,700 years before 1980 was 2720 B.C., which was in the Fifth Dynasty of Egypt (2750-2625 B.C.).*

According to Breasted, whom Osborn cited, the discovery and the use of the calendar in the early dynasty of Egypt documented a system of writing that may have originated in pre-dynastic times[8]. Breasted published numerous books on ancient Egypt; the part Osborn cited for the possible earliest serial was referring to the Pyramid Texts, the oldest mortuary literature of Egypt engraved upon the passages of the Fifth Dynasty pyramids (2750-2625 B.C.) and the Pyramid Texts can be found in several of Breasted’s books on ancient Egypt[9]. However, nowhere in any of Breasted’s books indicated that the Texts were recorded in any form of seriality. Breasted described the Pyramid Texts as “the oldest mortuary literature of Egypt which we possess, a series of texts supposed to be effective in securing for the deceased the enjoyment of a happy life[10].” The Texts constitute a “series of texts” of the oldest surviving body of Egyptian religious and funerary writings. But the Texts were not recorded daily or at any regular intervals, and therefore cannot be considered as journals or periodicals.

The journal indeed existed as a record of daily events before the earliest date mentioned in Encyclopaedia Britannica, and the evidence comes from another ancient country – China. In order to find the early Chinese history, we have to study the earliest documented comprehensive Chinese history book – Shi Ji and its author – Sima Qian.

SHI JI – THE GRAND SCRIBE’S RECORDS

Sima Qian, transliterated as Su-ma Ch’ien before the Pinyin system was adopted in the U.S. in the early 1980s, wrote the first comprehensive early Chinese history book – Shi Ji (The Grand Scribe’s Records or Records of the Grand Historian of China; hereafter, the Records). Sima was born about 145 B.C. and lived till 86 B.C. in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.). The Records is a book of history of a grand scope. It encompasses all Chinese history from 30th century B.C. through the end of the second century B.C. in 130 chapters and over 525,000 Chinese characters, the same characters used to the present time. The lengthy text of The Grand Scribe’s Records is divided into five sections: 12 Basic Annals (chapters 1-12), 10 Chronological Tables (chapter 13-22), 8 Treatises (chapter 23-30), 30 Hereditary Houses (chapter 31-60), and 70 Memoirs (chapter 61-130). Some Western scholars consider the five sections as five genres, but the form is radically different

* The second edition of Osborn’s book Serial Publications published in 1973 did talk about the Fifth Dynasty rather than the First. However, the typographical error of the First-Dynasty in the third edition (1980) was cited by several articles, including some articles published in the Serials Librarian.
from the general Western concept of the form of a history. It is important to know that the ten "Chronological Tables," were each used to record important events with a short introduction essay on the history of the period covered, include detailed dates, divided by years, months, and some even day by day starting around 800 B.C. This suggests that some kind of daily records, or journals, existed before Sima's life time.

After ten years of revising and augmenting the drafts of the Records, Sima put at least one copy in the imperial archive, kept one copy in his family, saved one copy in a famous mountain, and maybe buried one copy with him[11]. Because of the disfavor the Han imperial line found with Sima's description of their rule, the Records was not widely read during Sima's lifetime, which is not uncommon throughout human history for many great works. Only Sima's grandson, who apparently inherited the family copy of the text and worked on it, was honored two generations after. Despite the very restricted access to the imperial library, some scholars read the work. Pan Ku (32-92 A.D.), the author of the Han Shu (The History of the Former Han Dynasty) had a number of chapters based on corresponding texts in the Records[12]. By the end of Han Dynasty around 220-265 A.D., there were several references to the Records, and this was also the period of the first commentary applied to the work. The Grand Scribe's Records was hand-copied in every dynasty since Han, and later block-printed since Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.). It survived many natural and human-made disasters during the last 2000 years and was translated into many languages after the 19th century. The earliest surviving manuscripts of Shi Ji are the thread-bound 10th-11th century block-print editions, and a copy of the 15th century edition is available at the Harvard University Library[13]. Because of The Grand Scribe's Records 2000 years ago, Sima has been well known in China throughout history. Even in the 1990's, the Records remained one of the top 10 best-known titles in China[14].

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Unlike the great Greek historian Herodotus, who was a lifelong traveler, Sima traveled widely only when he was young. After he succeeded his father as the grand historian of the imperial court, he stayed in the capital city of China as a court official. The office of grand historian combined responsibility for astronomical observations and for regulation of the calendar with the duties of keeping a daily record of state events and court ceremonies[15]. However, this daily record of state events was an established practice from early dynasties and there are several evidences that approve the existence of the early Chinese daily records before Sima's lifetime (145 - 86 B.C.).

The first evidence comes from one of the archaeological discoveries of Qin Dynasty (221 - 207 B.C.) graves in 1975[16]. It was a bamboo book called Bian-Nian-Ji (Annual Chronicles). The book was rolled up like a pillow under the head of the corpse in Tomb II, which provides brief notices of yearly events day by day in the state of Qin from 306 to 217 B.C. when Qin unified China and established the Qin Dynasty[17]. This archaeological discovery proves that the journal as a daily records existed in China at least around 300 B.C., two centuries early than the Roman Acta Diurna. However, there was a major difference between early Roman and Chinese daily journals. The Acta Diurna focused on disseminating official information while the Chinese court chronicles served as imperial archives and only served the educated elites. One explanation is that the level of education for the citizens in Rome was higher than the citizens in Xian, the capital of Qin Dynasty. The other explanation is that the Chinese Emperors wanted closer control of who could access materials in the imperial library and archives. On the one hand, the Acta Diurna was read by many people, including commoners, while Chinese court chronicles were only accessible by limited imperial officials. On the other hand, Chinese court chronicles were preserved more complete as archives. This made it possible for Sima to document early Chinese history for the time period before his lifetime and to complete the Records 2000 years ago. It was mentioned in several Chinese history books much later that one part of the court chronicles was the daily record of the emperor's sex life. Since there were from a dozen to over several hundred imperial concubines for most Chinese emperors, daily records or even hourly records of the emperor's private life were important to select the legitimate heirs.

The second evidence comes from various sources written on Sima and his Records. A repeated analogy made by many scholars is what Herodotus was to the historical tradition of the Greco-Roman world, Sima has been to that of China, Korea, and Japan. Numerous commentaries, concordances, study books, research articles, and dissertations were written on Sima and his Records in the last 2000 years. From both Du Shengyun[18] and Ruan Zhi-sheng's research[19] we know that in the early Zhou Dynasty, the ancient Chinese historians had some connection with astronomical affairs, particularly the selection of lucky and unlucky days for the performance of important affairs. They were required to read and write, to keep and to update astrological calendars, and to handle various written
documents. The early historians were semi-religious official concerned with court ceremonies, sacrifices, and great state affairs, and only later became keepers of detailed and day to day chronicles. The chronicles were developed gradually, probably from the early astrological calendars, when diplomatic relations assumed greater complexity and importance during the second half of Zhou (770-472 B.C.). The historians act as secretaries to the rulers; they were present at official meetings of the rulers and kept a record of these meetings for future reference. The practice of keeping a daily record started at the beginning of the second half of Zhou Dynasty. Naito believes at the ceremony called “Proclaiming the New Year!” the Zhou ruler presented the calendar for the year, marked with dates and descriptions of important functions and duties, to the feudal lords. This calendar was then stored in the ancestral temple and on it the historians made notes of important events in the states, and the earliest such record goes back to Duke Yin (722 B.C.).[20] The reasonable conclusion is that the daily record came into existence gradually from its predecessor – astrological calendar between 800-700 B.C. in the second half of Zhou Dynasty.

The third evidence comes from Sima’s autobiography, the last chapter (Chapter 130) of the Records titled: Postface by His Honor the Grand Scribe. The chapter documents the existence of court chronological records before Sima’s lifetime in the imperial library. In order to write the history before his lifetime, Sima studied these court chronicles and used them extensively in the Records. In his autobiography, Sima documented his father’s final words and his preparation for the Records after he became the Grand Historian:

His father grasped his hand and said, weeping, “Our ancestors were Grand Historians for the house of Chou. From the most ancient times they were eminent and renowned when in the days of Yu and Hsia they were in charge of astronomical affairs.”[21]

Three Years after the death of his father, Ch’ien became Grand Historian. He read the various historical records and the books of the stone rooms and metal caskets.[22]

The “historical records and the books of the stone rooms and metal caskets” refer to the files in the archives of the imperial library. The Grand Historian’s duty was to keep a daily record of state events and court ceremonies, as well as celestial and terrestrial phenomena. Since the Grand Historian’s position was inherited since Zhou Dynasty (1073-256 B.C.), these historical records probably include those from Sima’s ancestors, whose title was better described as Grand Astrologer, and similar historical records from other states during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-472 B.C.).

The fourth evidence comes from the historical sources Sima cited in his Records. Sima did not provide readers with any notes or bibliography lists, but he mentioned more than 80 early historical sources within his Records[23]; most notably the famous Spring and Autumn Annals (the Annals hereafter) which started in 721 B.C. What later scholars admire in the accuracy of Sima’s chronology in his Records is what Sima himself admired in Confucius’ Annals. The fact that no chronological tables were presented before 800 B.C. in The Grand Scribe’s Records and the writing style of the first three basic annals is mainly dateless and legendary indicate that no written imperial court chronicles in China existed before 800 B.C. From the second half of the “The Zhou, Basic Annals Four”, years and months, even days are provided based on the Spring and Autumn Annals and other early chronicle records in the imperial library.

Sima himself doubted that reliable dating could be established for the events during the pre-dynasty and the first three dynasties due to lack of documented sources; as he says in this introduction to the Chapter 13 of the Records, “The Table of the Three Dynasties Genealogy”:

The records of the Five Emperors and Three Dynasties belong to high antiquity. For the Yin and beyond, the genealogy of the feudal lords cannot be tabulated. With the advent of the Chou, however, more can be written. In compiling his Spring and Autumn, Confucius followed the scribes’ writings. He recorded the first year of the Chou kings’ reigns, the first month of each year, even the months and days.[24]

The first three dynasties were referring to Xia (Hsai 2205 – 1766 B.C.), Shang or Yin (1766 – 1122 B.C.), and Zhou (Chou 1073 – 256 B.C.). True to his word, Sima only starts to have dates around 900-800 B.C. in the second half of “The Chou, Basic Annals 4,” and also “The Table of the Twelve Feudal States” begins in 841 B.C. Since Zhou had a Western period and Eastern period, Sima perhaps has the first, earlier half of Zhou (1073 – 772 B.C.) in mind as one of the three dynasties. For the second, and later half of Zhou (770 – 472 B.C.), also known as the Spring and Autumn period, there are more sources, most notably the famous Spring and Autumn Annals and Zuo Zuan (translated as Tso Chun before 1880). Sima referred to the two sources as one, and he called it Zuo’s Spring and Autumn Annals in the comments to Chapter 14 of the Records[25]. It has been known that the fame of the Spring
and Autumn Annals is mainly due to two factors: its compiler – Confucius and its commentary – Zuo Zuan.

The Spring and Autumn Annals covers the period from 721 B.C. to 479 B.C., shortly before Confucius’ death. It is the first recorded Chinese chronological history. The work is a complete month by month and sometimes day by day account of significant events that occurred during the reign of 12 rulers of Lu, the native state of Confucius. The Annals contains, in barest outline, notations of the internal affairs of Lu, of diplomatic conferences, feudal wars, and Lu’s relations with neighboring states, and some records of eclipses, floods, earthquakes, and prodigies of nature. Since Lu is only one of the seven states in the Spring and Autumn period, there might be some similar annals in other states. In fact, Sima starts to include dates from 841 B.C. in the Records, 119 years earlier than the beginning of the Spring and Autumn Annals; it indicates that Sima had some other sources even earlier than the Annals, but the earlier sources were not documented in the Records. In general, however, because of the consistency in recording the dates and events, and the completeness of almost 250 years of the Annals, the chronology after 721 B.C. is relative secure and there are relatively few internal contradictions for this period in The Grand Scribe’s Records. For this reason, the Spring and Autumn Annals started in 721 B.C. should be considered the first journal ever recorded in ancient China and probably in human history.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Throughout Chinese history, the Spring and Autumn Annals has been known as one of the Five Classics of Confucian classical canons instead of the earliest Chinese journals. There are several commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals, and Zuo’s Commentary is the most comprehensive one. It fills in the historical background of the events mentioned in the Annals, and presents its own interpretation of their moral significance. Both types of material are mingled together in the present text and the fact that Sima quotes frequently from both types suggests that the two were combined from early times. However, the exact form of the original texts of Spring and Autumn Annals and the Zuo’s Commentary is unknown, partially due to Qin’s repressive censorial control. The first emperor of the Qin Dynasty and ruler of the first unified Chinese empire, Shih Huang-ti (259 – 210 B.C.), ordered that historical records other than those of the Qin’s be destroyed so that history might be seen to begin with his dynasty. Many scholars who refused to do so were buried alive with their collections. All we know is that the original Annals is a bare and dull record of facts, official court statements, and containing not a word of direct speech from Confucius himself [26]. Regardless of how later commentators have labored to invest it with moral significance, it is obvious that the purpose of the original records, which Confucius used as his sources, was simply the recording of historical events. It is worth noting that both the Records and the Annals were written in the same Chinese characters that are still being used in Taiwan today and in Mainland China as recent as 1949, a simplified version of Chinese characters has been used in Mainland China since 1949, but most people can still recognize the older version characters. A recent English version of the Annals was translated by Knoblack and Riegel [27], and Zuo’s Commentary was translated by Burton Watson[28].

The definition of journal today is quite different from its original meaning of daily record. Now journal means periodic publication, usually with regular time intervals. It was not until the mid-17th century that publications called scholarly journals appeared regularly and collected a variety of materials designed to appeal to particular interests and came to occupy the large middle ground between books and newspapers. Much has been written about the beginning of scholarly journals, such as historian Kronick’s book[29] and scientist Porter’s paper[30]. More will be written about the beginning of another kind of journal – e-journal or e-paper in the networked environment. These are all beyond the scope of this paper.

NOTES


[26] Sarah A Queen, “From Chronicle to Canon: the Hermeneutics of the Spring and Autumn Annals According to Tung Chung-shu.” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1991.)


