

A Comparative Research of the Depiction of “Yixiang” in *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian* and Reasons for the Depicting Discrepancy

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Abstract:

Both *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian* contain numerous accounts of “Yixiang”, yet their depictions exhibit significant discrepancies. This study conducts a comparative analysis of the overlapping historical periods (from the first year of Qin Shihuang’s reign to the first year of Emperor Wu of Han’s Taichu era) in the two works, focusing on representative accounts of “Yixiang”. Using literature review, comparative analysis, case study, and close reading methodologies, the research found that the differences primarily manifested in the degree of association between “Yixiang” and historical events, the level of detail in content, the presentation of dream omens, and the recording of auspicious or inauspicious outcomes. These discrepancies in historical accounts primarily stem from differences in the authors’ perspectives, variations in their sources of historical materials, and differences in the formats of historical texts. The evolution of such writings reflected the developmental trajectory of Chinese historiography, which progressed from the cognitive framework of “unity between heaven and humanity” to the rational understanding of “separation between heaven and humanity.” Though differing in nature, both texts have jointly shaped and carried forward the dual tradition of “investigating the relationship between heaven and humanity” and “emphasizing human affairs” in Chinese historiography.

Keywords: *Shiji*; *Zizhi Tongjian*; Yixiang; depiction; reason.

1. Introduction

Shiji and *Zizhi Tongjian* stand as the twin pillars of ancient Chinese historiography. Representing the

pinnacle of biographical and chronological approaches to comprehensive history, respectively, they also hold an undeniable place in literary history. Both historical texts document numerous “Yixiang”, which

serve not only as objective records of historical events but also embody the historians' profound reflections on the relationship between heaven and humanity, the laws of history, and political ethics. Comparing the writings of these two traditions not only offers insight into the evolution of Chinese historiographical thought but also reveals the differing historical perspectives and methodologies of historians across distinct eras.

Existing researches on the depiction of "Yixiang" in *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian* primarily include: Studies specifically focused on the calamities and omens in *Shiji*, such as Cai Ying's *A Study on the Writing of Disasters in Records of the Grand Historian* and Liao Shanjing's *The Research of Witchcraft and Anomaly of "Records of the Historian"* [1,2]. Additionally, existing literatures also address the topic from broader historical and cultural perspectives. For instance, Zhao Shilong et al. explored the literary depiction of calamities and anomalies during the Han dynasty and their connection to social thought [3]. Wang Qian, meanwhile, focused on how extraordinary phenomena in the Mandate of Heaven myth construct narratives of royal authority [4]. Specialized research on "Yixiang" in *Zizhi Tongjian* includes Zhengfu's analysis of celestial-human correspondence records in the work, using the example of Mars stationing at the heart constellation [5]. Comparative studies of *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian* primarily include Wang Keduan and Ma Haobin's examination of the evolving portrayals of Liu Bang and Qin Shihuang in both works [6,7], as well as Shang Xiaoyu and Che Miaomiao's analysis contrasting the depictions of Legalist figures and Warring States strategists [8,9]. Jia Junyi, meanwhile, analyzed the similarities and differences in the political perspectives of Sima Qian and Sima Guang [10]. Overall, studies on "Yixiang" exist for both *the Shiji* and *the Zizhi Tongjian*, but research on the *Shiji* is more abundant and detailed, while studies on the *Zizhi Tongjian* are extremely scarce. Comparative research between the two works has primarily focused on character portrayals, leaving comparative studies of "Yixiang" as a gap in the field.

This study will conduct a comparative analysis of the overlapping historical periods covered in the two works, focusing primarily on representative accounts of "Yixiang" from the first year of Qin Shihuang's reign to the first year of Emperor Wu of Han's Taichu era. Employing methods such as documentary research, comparative analysis, case study, and close reading methodologies, it will explore the similarities and differences in their respective narratives. It aims to refine the research framework by analyzing textual characteristics, thereby offering new perspectives and approaches for historical and literary studies.

In previous studies, "Yi"(anomalies) and "Zai"(disasters) were often discussed together, with "Yi" typically under-

stood as strange occurrences causing no tangible harm, while "Zai" referred to natural calamities resulting in substantial losses. *The Gongyang Commentary* had already distinguished between these concepts, and in the view of the ancients, "Yi" were weightier than "Zai" [1]. The paper believes that the term "Zai and Yi" remains appropriate when applied to the pre-Qin and Han periods, where it was predominantly used to denote negative influences. However, by the Song Dynasty, scholars had begun to reflect on the extent to which such phenomena influenced historical events. Furthermore, as this paper also explores auspicious omens, the continued use of this concept may not be entirely fitting. Therefore, this paper adopts the term "Yixiang", referring to unusual occurrences. Drawing from Xu Hao's *Commentary on the Shuowen Jiezi: Section on "Yi"*, which states: "'Yi', extended meaning: extraordinary events are called 'Yi'" [11], the extended meaning of "Yi" is employed to define phenomena deviating from the norm. This encompasses astronomical anomalies, divine omens and auspicious signs, as well as prophetic dreams. Natural disasters("Zai") are also abnormal occurrences that deviate from nature's original course of development. Therefore, "Zai" discussed separately by previous scholars can also be classified as "Yixiang".

2. The Demonstration of Depicting Discrepancy

2.1 The Degree of Association between "Yixiang" and Historical Events

Based on observations and analysis of the depiction of extraordinary phenomena in *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian*, the research has discovered that, in *Shiji*, accounts of "Yixiang" are often followed by descriptions of specific historical events, exhibiting a high degree of correlation with historical occurrences. These phenomena and events frequently present a sense of being "intricately linked", as if the author did not merely record the phenomena but consciously incorporated them into the historical narrative, thereby making deliberate allusions. In contrast, the connection between "Yixiang" and historical events in *Zizhi Tongjian* is relatively weak, giving it a more purely objective documentary quality. For instance, regarding the locust plague in the fourth year of Emperor Jing of Han's reign, *Shiji* documents both "Yixiang" and preceding historical events, whereas *Zizhi Tongjian* records only "Yixiang" without any associated events [12,13].

Regarding the solar eclipse, *Shiji* states: "On the day of Yisi in July, a solar eclipse occurred. Chancellor Liu She was dismissed." In *Zizhi Tongjian*, this became: "Autumn,

July, on the day of Bingwu, Chancellor She was dismissed. On the last day of the month, Yisi, a solar eclipse occurred.” [12,13] The day of Bingwu is the thirtieth day of July, and the day of Yisi is the twenty-ninth day of July. Sima Guang reversed the chronology, clearly distinguishing Liu She’s dismissal from the solar eclipse as two separate events occurring at different times. Sima Qian, however, directly linked Liu She’s dismissal with the solar eclipse, even creating an illusion that both events happened on the same day. By comparing historical records, it is evident that Sima Guang here likely drew upon the account in *The Book of the Former Han* (where “Liu She” is recorded as “Zhou She”, referring to the same person). But why did he choose this book rather than follow *Shiji*? One possible interpretation is that he likely believed this approach would provide greater temporal clarity. Moreover, in his subconscious, these were fundamentally unrelated events, hence the necessity for precise chronology. Moreover, in the third year of Emperor Jing of Han’s reign, *Shiji* linked the comet to Zhou Yafu’s death, an omen of ill fortune that came to pass. The solar eclipse was associated with the deployment of troops outside the Eastern Capital Gate, an anomaly that triggered personnel changes [12]. *Zizhi Tongjian* first records earthquakes, droughts, locust plagues, comets, and solar eclipses before narrating events, striving to ensure narrative completeness rather than allowing celestial phenomena to “interfere” with the recording of history [13]. This also accounts for the difference in their positions within the narrative of “Yixiang”. *Shiji* predominantly employs an insertional style of documentation, whereas *Zizhi Tongjian* often places such accounts in a specific location within the text.

2.2 The Level of Detail in Content

On the whole, *Shiji* provides detailed accounts of “Yixiang”, while *Zizhi Tongjian* offers concise descriptions or even omits them.

As an example, the story of Liu Bang killing the snake in *Shiji* is a narrative with a complete plot and vivid portrayal, totaling 152 characters [12]. *Zizhi Tongjian*, however, offers only a concise summary, omitting details such as the dialogue between the man on foot and Liu Bang, the communication between the passerby and the old woman, and Liu Bang’s mood of “secret delight and self-confidence”. It retains only the most essential elements, condensing the account into 42 characters. From the depictions in *Shiji*, we see Liu Bang as a man of both heroic spirit and self-satisfied vulgarity, presenting a vividly lifelike portrait. *Zizhi Tongjian* merely informs readers that such events occurred, deeming it sufficient to understand the circumstances, while details become less

essential. Regarding the account of Liu Bang possessing the “aura of the Son of Heaven”, *Zizhi Tongjian* merely summarizes it as “frequent strange phenomena” without elaborating further [13]. As for “Yixiang” surrounding Liu Bang including Liu Ao’s dreaming of encountering with a god that led to the birth of Liu Bang, “long that constantly appeared above Liu Bang”, and the old man foretelling the future greatness of the Liu Bang’s family, none of these are recorded in *Zizhi Tongjian*.

Another striking contrast lies in the records of “Yixiang” during the reign of Qin Shihuang. The recording of “Yixiang” in *Shiji* is primarily concentrated within the Annals. Comparing other entries within the Annals reveals that the depiction of such phenomena in *The Annals of Qin Shihuang* is remarkably extensive and profoundly significant. Compared to the relevant sections in *Zizhi Tongjian: Annals of Qin*, the former contains significantly more accounts of unusual phenomena than the latter. Notably, comets which symbolize calamities and ill omens are mentioned five times in *Shiji*, whereas *Zizhi Tongjian* mentions none of them whatsoever. Moreover, during the Mount Tai Fengshan ritual in the twenty-eighth year of Qin Shihuang’s reign, a violent storm struck. *The Book of Fengshan* in *Shiji* explicitly stated that this was “a punishment for those who wield power without virtue” [12]. In the eighth year of Qin Shihuang’s reign, the “great fish migration upstream” occurred. This was essentially a common flood, its immediate succession to Cheng Jiao’s rebellion instantly imbued it with symbolic meaning that the fish serves as an allegory for the rebellion of the petty man [12]. None of these are recorded in *Zizhi Tongjian*. Regarding the meteorite that fell upon the death of Qin Shihuang, *Zizhi Tongjian* records it in 37 characters, just a purely historical account. *Shiji* spans 191 characters, beginning with the omen of “Mars stationed at the heart constellation” to introduce the meteorite. After the stone was destroyed, the emperor commissioned scholars to compose the “Ode to Immortal Sages”. Subsequently, a jade disc appeared bearing the inscription “The following year, Qin Shihuang shall die”. The entire sequence is a layered succession of “Yixiang” and character reactions. With a literary touch, it laid the groundwork for the death of Ying Zheng and the fall of the Qin state. So there exists a significant divergence between the two works in handling “Yixiang” of this period.

2.3 The Presentation of Dream Omens

The dream accounts in *Shiji* are remarkably comprehensive and detailed. From the first year of Qin Shihuang’s reign to the first year of Emperor Wu of Han’s Taichu era, six prophetic dreams were recorded: Qin Shihuang

dreamed of battling the sea god; Second Emperor of Qin dreamed of a white tiger gnawing at a horse; Liu Ao's dreaming of encountering with a god that led to the birth of Liu Bang; Bo Ji dreamed of a long coiled around her abdomen, giving birth to Liu Heng; Emperor Wen dreamed of a yellow-headed man assisting him to ascend to heaven; Beauty Wang dreamed of the sun entering her embrace, giving birth to Liu Che. From the fulfillment of nightmarish visions in reality to the divine mandate inscribed upon the birth of an emperor, every dream holds either symbolic or suggestive meaning.

Zizhi Tongjian exhibits a clear tendency to avoid discussing this aspect, preserving only the dream shared by Second Emperor of Qin and Beauty Wang. Particularly regarding Qin Shihuang's sea fishing expedition, *Zizhi Tongjian* skips over "dream of battling the sea god" and dream divination, transitioning directly to the emperor "falling ill upon reaching Pingyuan Ferry". This markedly diminishes the fantastical elements, while the fatalistic sense of the emperor's futile attempt to slay an evil deity is further diluted by the continuous historical narrative [13].

2.4 The Recording of Auspicious or Inauspicious Outcomes

"Yixiang" are categorized as auspicious or inauspicious ones, and the divergence in recording them reached its peak during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han. Due to Emperor Wu of Han's lengthy reign, during which his political achievements and shortcomings were equally notable, and his late-life emphasis on sacrificial rites, the doctrine of divine-human resonance flourished at this time. Consequently, records of extraordinary phenomena from this period are particularly abundant. The distinction lies in the fact that the chapters centered on *The Annals of Emperor Wu* in *Shiji* predominantly document auspicious omens. These include a white deer in the Shanglin Park, the capture of a unicorn during the sacrificial rites at Yong, the discovery of a bronze cauldron at Fenyin, the shooting of a sika deer in Zhongshan, the sighting of the Star of Longevity, and the sprouting of lingzhi within the palace halls. These are a series of auspicious signs. Droughts were mentioned only twice, while comets, fires, and locust plagues were each mentioned once [12]. *Zizhi Tongjian* also encompasses the aforementioned auspicious phenomena, but its accounts of inauspicious events or natural disasters are more frequent. These include eight comets and unusual celestial bodies, seven droughts, six solar eclipses, locust plagues, fires, and floods each four times; strong winds, hailstorms, and famines each twice; earthquakes and moth infestations each once. It also documents the wind "red

as blood" in the fourth year of the Jianyuan era and the heavy frost in the summer of the fourth year of the Yuan-guang era [13].

3. Reasons of the Depicting Discrepancy

Based on the above textual analysis, the research finds that the primary reasons for the variations in depicting are the author's perspectives, the sources of historical materials, and the format of historical texts, among which the author's perspectives is the most significant factor.

3.1 The Discrepancy of Author's Perspectives

Although the both works were written by historians adhering to the principle of factual recording, the recorders' perspectives also influenced the record of history to a certain extent.

Sima Qian once studied under Dong Zhongshu and largely inherited his doctrine of heavenly mandate. In his reflections on the mandate of heaven, he then developed a unique historical perspective: "to explore the relationship between heaven and humanity, to understand the transformations throughout history, and to establish his own school of thought." The relationship between heaven and humanity is elaborated in *The Book of Celestial Officials* in *Shiji*. In Sima Qian's view, Mars stationing at the heart constellation, solar eclipses, and comets were all ill omens. Regarding Mars stationing at the heart constellation, he believed that "when Mars violates the station at the corner, war ensues". Regarding solar eclipses, there are assertions that "when the sun is eclipsed, it portends unfavorable outcomes" and "a solar eclipse signifies ill fortune". He also used comets as metaphors for turmoil, as in: "During the reign of Qin Shihuang, comets appeared four times within fifteen years, some lingering for eighty days, their tails stretching across the entire sky. Subsequently, Qin conquered the six states by force, unified China, and repelled the barbarians from the four corners. Corpses littered the land like tangled hemp. Thus, the Zhangchu state rose in rebellion, and within thirty years, wars raged incessantly, too numerous to count." Furthermore, the movements of the moon and the five planets may signify that the emperor will execute ministers or that the ministers will conspire together in rebellion. Some even directly likened celestial bodies to rulers and ministers, and to the overall state of the nation. Celestial phenomena were closely intertwined with national affairs [12]. Sima Qian's conception of the relationship between heaven and humanity extended from celestial phenomena to the documentation of natural disasters and dreams. He

did not merely record these occurrences but also interpreted them through divination and astrological analysis, thereby endowing these extraordinary events with a profound sense of connection to human affairs. This belief in profound and mysterious divine destiny directly shaped Sima Qian's distinctive style of "cherishing the extraordinary things". The more bizarre and inexplicable the event is, the more vividly he depicted it. This is evident in his series of depictions about the "Yixiang" surrounding Qin Shihuang and Liu Bang [14].

Sima Guang was profoundly influenced by Confucian culture and maintained a reserved, even critical stance toward theories involving supernatural phenomena and occult practices. Adhering to the principle that "drawing lessons from past events can inform governance", Sima Guang's purpose in compiling *Zizhi Tongjian* was "to provide a modicum of assistance in studying ancient history and supplementing the wisdom of the sage ruler" [15]. *Zizhi Tongjian* is essentially a book for emperors, primarily intended for monarchs to study and draw lessons from. Given that the emperor was occupied with countless affairs each day and scarcely had time to peruse historical records of past dynasties, *Zizhi Tongjian* naturally had to present the most crucial matters to the sovereign in order to be more efficient. As for "Yixiang", which defy clear explanation, they offer little benefit to "supplementing the wisdom of the sage". Historical records exist as objective accounts of the past, while simplifying the complex serves the need for political reflection: "to trim away verbosity, distill the essentials, and focus solely on matters crucial to the nation's rise and fall, the welfare of its people, and those that exemplify virtue worthy of emulation or vice serving as cautionary tales" [15]. If natural disasters are still linked to the rise and fall of nations, then there is no particular need to record those celestial phenomena, dream omens, and other signs that hold no substantive significance.

3.2 The Discrepancy of the Sources of Historical Materials

Sima Qian consciously carried forward the cultural tradition of recording calamities and anomalies as documented in *Chunqiu* and *Zuozhuan*. His writing technique of "embedding commentary within narrative" is directly descended from the stylistic approach of *Chunqiu*. His grand travels in his 20s enabled him to engage with individuals from all walks of life, gathering diverse folk tales and mythical legends. He then integrated these into his historical writings, making them integral parts of the historical record.

Sima Guang, who lived during the Song Dynasty, had

access to historical materials unavailable to Sima Qian, such as *Hanshu*, *The Later Hanshu*, and *The Annals of the Han Dynasties*. He could selectively record information from these sources, including *Shiji*, through the method of "comparative analysis". According to *Zizhi Tongjian Kaoyi*, it is clear that he adopted a rigorous attitude to examining and critically documenting "Yixiang" [16]. Zhang Xuhou also noted in his *Tongjian Studies* that Sima Guang, adhering to the guiding principle of "governing the state", edited out the mystical narratives from *Shiji*, retaining only records of calamities and omens relevant to court politics. This reflected the evolution of historical tradition and established a selective narrative paradigm [17].

3.3 The Discrepancy of the Format of Historical Texts

Shiji is a biographical general history that chronicles events through the activities of individuals. "Yixiang" are woven into the narrative, allowing for a more flexible account that encompasses not only astronomical anomalies and natural disasters but also incorporates mystical phenomena, prophecies, and prophetic dreams. As Liu Zhiji noted in *Shitong*: "It encompasses both the obvious and the hidden, the grand and the minute, without omission." "Yixiang" in *Shiji* are often embedded within character narratives, closely intertwined with the destinies of its protagonists [18].

Zizhi Tongjian is a chronological general history that follows the timeline as its guiding thread. Its narrative is clearer and more concise, abiding by the principle of objective record-keeping, with "Yixiang" strictly tied to their respective years and months.

4. Conclusion

The depictions of "Yixiang" in *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian* differ notably in their relevance to historical events, level of detail, portrayal of prophetic dreams, and contrasts between auspicious and inauspicious omens. Minor variations, lacking systematic patterns or representativeness, are not enumerated here. This discrepancy primarily stems from differences in the authors' perspectives, historical sources, and the structure of their works. This also results in a different reading experience between the two works. *Shiji* is distinctly more literary and fantastical, written by a highly individual historian who infused his own emotional experiences into the text. *Zizhi Tongjian*, on the other hand, is the work of a historian whose rigor borders on stiffness, recording history through dispassionate observation and objective selection. Essentially this embodies two distinct historiographical paradigms. The evolution of this apocalyptic writing reflects the rationalization pro-

cess in Chinese historiography, shifting from the “unity of heaven and humanity” to the “separation of heaven and humanity”. Together, these developments have shaped the dual tradition of Chinese historiography: the pursuit of understanding heaven and humanity, and the emphasis on human affairs.

This research aims to reveal the unique value of the two great historical works by comparing “Yixiang” hidden within historical narratives, thereby offering new perspectives and approaches for comparative studies. But due to limitations in writing ability, there remain shortcomings that require supplementation and correction.

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