

# A Study of the Chronology of the Bamboo Annals

Weina Zhang<sup>1</sup> Qian Tian<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> School of Historical Culture and Tourism, Xi'an University, Xi'an, Shaanxi 710065, China

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. Email: whylyxy@xawl.edu.cn

## ABSTRACT

As the one of the earliest chronicles found and not destroyed by Qin dynasty in China, the Bamboo Annals was annotated and compiled into books in the Western Jin dynasty, but it was still inevitably lost at Song dynasty. After the Ming and Qing dynasties, scholars gradually realized its role as an indispensable historical source for the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. It gradually formed two systems of ancient and modern editions. By studying the chronological elements in the ancient version of the Bamboo Annals and the writing style of the "cumulative years", the author classifies the way of dating in the Bamboo Annals, and puts forward the view that the chronological method in the Bamboo Annals is helpful to judge the authenticity of the Bamboo Annals.

**Keywords:** *The Bamboo Annals, The annals method of the reign of the kings, The cumulative method of writing the years.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 281DC, the Bamboo Annals was unearthed in the county of Ji (now Ji County, Henan, China). The book was not in line with traditional Confucianism, by the end of the Northern Song dynasty, not only did the original text of the book disappear, but also the explanatory texts compiled by Xunxu, Heqiao and Shuxi in the Western Jin dynasty. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the book was recollected and reorganized by scholars, and then it evolved into both ancient and modern editions. The modern editions of the Bamboo Annals were called a "forged book" during the Qing dynasty. In recent years, the Bamboo Annals has also attracted the attention of some American scholars, such as Mr. David S. Nivison (Stanford University, USA). Based on the modern editions of the Bamboo Annals, he has combined the results of ancient astronomical and chronological research to offer different opinions on the conclusions of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynastic project. In the study ancient version scholars of the Bamboo Annals, Youceng Zhu, Guowei Wang, Mu Qian and Xiangyong Fan are representatives. In the 1990s, based on the ancient editions of the Bamboo Annals, Min Li and others also published their translation and commentary of the Bamboo Annals. In recent years scholars still focus their attentions on the comparison and proof

reading of editions, such as Zaiyuan Qin and Hanyi Xia (University of Chicago, USA). Under this background, the author had a study of the chronological elements and the writing style of the Bamboo Annals, tidied up the chronological methods contained, and made a suggestion for the standardization of references in both the ancient and modern versions of the Bamboo Annals.

## 2. THE ANNALS METHOD OF THE REIGN OF THE KINGS

As early as the Spring and Autumn period, the annals of history books had a system of its own. Before the Han dynasty, the most used method of annals was the order and years of the kings reign, the Bamboo Annals complied with this rule. For example, "Yi Yin inherited the seventh year of the throne" [1]. The study of annals method is very important, it can vertically reflect the changes in the calendar system and annals methods over the dynasties. In the horizontally, it can glimpse the differences about the catalogue ideology of different authors in the same period. The annals method of the reign of kings was based on two elements: the honorific title of king and the time. From the point of view of writing methods, the two chronological elements in the Bamboo Annals is consistent with other chronological books of the same period, such as the book Spring and Autumn

Annals. For example, in the Spring and Autumn Annals, "At the spring of Hidden king's first year, the first month of the king's reign". In this sentence, 'Hidden' is the honorific title of king, 'the first year' and 'the first month of the kings reign' is the

time, they form the details of the chronological. In addition, in the Bamboo Annals, it is worth noting other information to us after the "month". For research convenience, the details are listed (quoted from Min Li's translation of the Bamboo Annals):

Table 1. Comparison table of the written style of the "month"

	Page	Contents
A different image	91 pages	In the eighth year, there were no clouds but thunder. In the tenth month, Zhuang Bo rebelled against Qu Wo
	112 pages	Sixth year, December, a bumper harvest in the peach and apricot
	128 pages	Ten years and nine months, a bumper harvest in the peach and apricot
Change of Throne	118 pages	In the eleventh month of the tenth year, Goujian died
	144 pages	In the tenth month, Yue killed Zhu Jiu
	184 pages	In September, Qin Weiyang invaded west area

The above "Table 1" shows that the month was related to the king's live or die. This phenomenon reflects that the author records it in more detail when recording important events.

In the Bamboo Annals, the annals can be divided into the following patterns according to the completeness of its chronological elements.

The first pattern is it has complete chronological elements, "The honorific title of king + year + month". For example "In the tenth year of king You, in the ninth month, a bumper harvest in the peach and apricot"[2].the three elements of the annals method of the reign of the kings are all present in this sentence, and the records are accurate and clear.

The second pattern is it partially omitted chronological elements for the reign of kings. Such as in the record of the King Xiang, "In the first year he conquered Huai and Fei, the second year he conquered Feng and Huang"[3]. Before this sentence, it has written the king is Xiang, so we found the sentence that omitted chronology of the honorific title of kings is generally after a sentence that has honorific title of kings.

There is also a special form worthy of note, the way in which "(year)" is written. It should be related to multiple corrections, such as a war in King Xuan of the Zhou. The earlier version Bamboo Annals was recorded: "The king sent his troops to attack the Taiyuan, but failed to overcome them"[4]. But in the later version, it was recorded: "(thirty-one years), the king sent his troops to attack the Taiyuan, but failed to overcome them"[5]. Similar example is a story about King Xuan of the Zhou, the earlier version was recorded: "In the time of King Xuan of the Zhou, horses were transformed into foxes"[6]. But later version said, "In the thirty-

third year of King Zhou (Ling) [Xuan], a horse was transformed into a fox"[7]. Obviously, both "(thirty-one years)" and the "thirty-third year" is supplemented by later generations.

In a word, during the king's reign, the chronicle method with complete chronological approach occupies the majority in the Bamboo Annals, and it also has the incomplete chronicle method. There are three reasons for this result.

The first reason is the style of the Bamboo Annals was incomplete in that period. During the Spring and Autumn period, another chronological history book Shang Shu, it also followed the catalogue logic of complete chronological elements or incomplete chronological method. Thus, in the Spring and Autumn period, historians have the conditions for used omitted chronological form, the Bamboo Annals had omitted form when it was first written is possible.

The second reason is the result of later copying. As we know, the Bamboo Annals was lost after the Western Jin Dynasty. Until the Ming and Qing dynasties, the historians excerpt and organize its sentences from other history books, like Shi Ji and Tai Ping Yu Lan etc. Finally, it gradually formed two systems of ancient and modern editions. In the process of copying and translating, it was very easy for the bamboo slips to fall off and become unrecoverable. As early as the Western Jin dynasty, those translators, Xuxun, QiaoHe and Xishu, they found there were many unidentifiable bamboo slips. Because of the incomplete, these bamboo slips could not be edited into the Bamboo Annals, which may have led to the mutilation of the elements of the chronicle.

The third reason is the Bamboo Annals was restored from other history books. Before the Bamboo Annals lost, the historians cited sentences from it, it is common for them to leave only the part of the useful content in their excerpts not all of it. After the Bamboo Annals lost, those who want to restore the Bamboo Annals had extracted useful information from these history books which quoted the sentences of the Bamboo Annals, but the information was incomplete. It is therefore understandable that the Bamboo Annals is not as complete as the Spring and Autumn Annals, a chronicle of the same period.

### 3. THE STYLE OF CUMULATIVE DATE WRITING

In the Bamboo Annals, there are two main ways of writing about cumulative date writing style, "one king's years" and "multiple kings' years".

#### 3.1 "One King's Years"

In the Bamboo Annals, when it comes to the cumulative the ruling year of a king, iconic leading words are always found, such as erect, death, get, year, etc.

**Erect:** In the Bamboo Annals, "The honorific title of king + erects + number" is often used to indicate the number of years the king reigned. But not all the word "erect" can indicate the accumulation of years of a king. For example, "the erect of King Wei of Qi" lacks a specific number, so it cannot indicate the number of years of a king.

**Death:** Death is usually put at the end of a sentence, indicating 'the last year'. It is common to indicate the number of years that the king reigned in the form of "number + the honorific title of king + death". For example, "(in the seventh year), marquis Xiang died, marquis Ling succeeded to the throne in the following year"[8], "in the twenty-six year, the Wu marquis died"[9]. In addition, in the Bamboo Annals, others key words such as "get" and "year" have the meaning of reign. The usage is the same as "erect", for example, "Gong got twenty-five years"[10], etc.

Not every king has cumulative years at the end of his reign, some kings have some records about cumulative years and others do not. This shows that the author has the writing style of summarizing the number of years of some emperor's reign.

#### 3.2 "Multiple Kings' Years"

The writing style of "multiple kings' years" generally occurs at the end of the dynasty", from Yu to Jie, there were seventeen kings, have kings and no kings, a total of 471 years"[11]. In different editions of the Bamboo Annals, it appears at the end of the Xia period and before the Yin period, due to Yu was the first king of the Xia dynasty, and Jie was the last king of the Yin dynasty. But in the other history books, the years from Xia to Yin are controversial, such as five hundred years, four hundred and thirty-two, four hundred and thirty-one, four hundred and fifty-nine, four hundred and eighty-three, four hundred and seventy-two, four hundred and forty. Youceng Zhu is the author of the Ji Zhong chronicles. He suspected that the number of years of Xia and Yin is addition by Xunxu and Heqiao[12]. Since the beginning of Youzeng Zhu 's book, scholars from the Ming and Qing dynasties have been disputing the writing of some of the "multiple kings' years". The author of this paper holds that there is a basis for this view, but it cannot be inferred that all the "multiple kings' years" were added by later generations. The reasons are as follows.

- It is known that Chinese cannot get a "the title of honor after death" when they are living. In the Bamboo Annals, many people named at their "the title of honor after death" when they were first appearance. It shows that the Bamboo Annals is a summary from a long time later of history, rather than a contemporary account of contemporary events. Since it is a review retelling, it is possible to write a summary of the previous history according to dynasties in a 'cumulative' manner.
- In the first section of this paper, when discussing the partially omitted version of the chronology of the reign of the kings, it was concluded that " the omitted sentences are generally after sentences with annual numbers". So the use of the names of kings means categorical summary in some. In the Bamboo Annals, "one king's years" can even be distilled into a format. "Multiple kings' years" have same used with "one king's year". So it is possible that the use of the first "one king's years" was already in used before Western Jin Dynasty.

In summary, the author holds that, when the Bamboo Annals first written, cumulative date writing style has been in existence. But due to the numerical of different cumulative date, historians have disagreement over the authenticity of the

Bamboo Annals. Those scholars who was corrected the number of years according to their own perceptions in the process of translating and transcribing it should be responsible for these disagreements.

#### 4. RESIDUAL REMARKS

There are only a few sentences with the Chinese sexagenary cycle in the Bamboo Annals, and it has been debated by historians whether these entries are from the original text of the Bamboo Annals. Youzeng Zhu stressed that the ancients did not name their years in terms of the sexagenary cycle chronological method, until the Eastern Han dynasty. In conjunction with the above study, in the Bamboo Annals, the order and years of the kings reign are the main method of chronology. The author holds that, in view of the strict requirements for the chronology of the Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period, it is unlikely that in the Bamboo Annals different chronological methods were used in it when it was written in the first time. As we know, the ancient and modern versions of the Bamboo Annals got historical materials from the same books. So even if the versions are different, they were use the same chronological method.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Since its discovery in the Western Jin dynasty, the Bamboo Annals has been subject to several ups and downs. The differences in the editions have led to doubt of the book among scholars about the authenticity. In recent years, some scholars have quoted the numbers from the Bamboo Annals to deduce the correctness of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynastic project. The authors agree with this innovative approach to research, but in the Bamboo Annals, one thing often be ignored was that some number have been corrected by someone. It caused a lot of controversy. Therefore, scholars believe that those scholars who was corrected the number of years according to their own perceptions in the process of translating and transcribing should be responsible for these disagreements.

Based on the discussion of this paper, the author proposes that before they quote the numbers from the Bamboo Annals, they should discuss the authenticity of these chronological figures at first. Therefore, the question of whether the years in the Bamboo Annals can be used to prove the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties project it is worthy of

careful consideration. In the author's view, when using a reorganized history book such as the Bamboo Annals as evidence for history or as supplementary material, one should be careful to trace the source word by word and sentence by sentence, rather than quoting them directly.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Qian Tiancollected data, Weina Zhang analysed data and wrote the manuscript.

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