HERMENEUTICS AND NOVELS IN MING-QING DYNASTIES

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Abstract: Common points exist between the doctrine of "investigatory reference" in literature commentaries on novels in Ming and Qing dynasties and the doctrine of "closing reading" in Anglo-American literary commentaries. One of them is that both ideas aim at arriving at an understanding of the true meaning of a text. Both ideas emphasize that to have a true understanding of the true meaning of a text, a reader needs to go beyond the language and his/her subjectivity; a reader should have a macro vision to avoid a blind eye. Both ideas emphasize objectivity as an important principles of reading. Both ideas emphasize recognition of the objective existence of texts as the foundation of reading texts, and repeated reading as an important condition to ensure objectivity of reading.

At a first look, the question of how to read a text is one that scratch where there is no itch. But it is not. In effect, as part of the general question of how to understand properly a text, the question of how read is an important one. The question is of what the objective of reading is, how to have a proper relation to a text, and what the proper method of reading is. While interpretation is crucial to understanding, reading is crucial to interpretation. Reading, a task but also a challenge!

Ι

The concept that all studies and analyses of language, characters, metaphor, symbols and rhetorics and the like in a novel aim at understanding the true meaning of a text is emphasized utmost in both the doctrine of "investigatory reference" in literary commentary of novels in *Ming* and *Qing* Dynasties and the doctrine of "Close Reading" in Anglo-American literary criticism. For both doctrines literary commentary and criticism, the ultimate aim and functions of words and symbols is to convey the meaning and thought which an author intends to communicate and thus the task of reading a text, from studies of words to interpret symbolic images, is to get into a deeper, true meaning of the text.

"Meaning" is the essence and substance of literary texts and that which a text is to create and convey. Accordingly, to have a proper understanding of the meaning of a text is the ultimate goal and endeavor of reading a literature work, and all preliminary efforts and preparations of reading for any reader should be for the

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arrival of a true understanding of the deep, ultimate meaning of a text. Indeed, in reading a novel, the fundamental task and challenge to understand the meaning of a text as it spoke to its readers in its time and space. It is to read a text hermeneutically. For a reader to be guided by the text which s/he reads to its meaning is the first, last, and constant task and challenge. This is emphasized in literary commentaries on novels in Ming-Qing Dynasties utmost. Thus, for example, Sheng Yusi (盛于斯)'s "Mistake in *Journey to the West* (西游记误)" in his *Hugh's shadow language* (《 休庵影语》) reads:

The author of *Journey to the West* is very profound. Every established subject-matter is of something. Even those used comic language as the mediation are also intended to talk about the essence of human living, and thus have profound meanings. Its last chapter says: "99 count down to the Great *Dao*, and the 33 rows lead to enlightenment'. Number "9", symbolizes the Yang energy; Number "99", a pair of 9, and symbolizes the ultimate Yang Energy. The Yang energy is born in a child in age 10 one, thrives in a person in age 30, flourishes in a person in age 50, gets old in a person in age 70, finally dies in a person in age 90. 3 times 3 is 9. Do not use the number "1" but use the number "9", this is akin to the saying, "the original 9, do not use the hidden dragon." 33, 99, this makes ninety-nine times. And this chapter is falsely penned by others in later future generations." The author of *The Journey to the West* invests profound meanings and thoughts in the text of the novel. Every title and phrase carries a meaning. That the novel *the Journey to the West* has ninety-nine chapters of also imply the meaning that 99 returns to 1. ²

Sheng's point is that the last chapter of the novel does not convey the intended meaning of the true author of *Journey to the West*; thus this chapter should be falsely penned by others. Sheng can distinguish between what is not the intended meaning and what is the intended meaning by the author of *Journey to the West*, because he has grasped the deep, comprehensive meaning of the novel and worked out the true meaning of the text by careful, hermeneutical reading.

Here, what Sheng says is of a two-fold instructive to us. On the one hand, to grasp the deep, comprehensive meaning of a text, which is the goal of any literature reading, one must engage in a careful, deep, and investigatory reading. On the other hand, the more one's comprehensive knowledge—literary, philosophical and other cultural knowledge—is solid, the more possible one can arrive a profound, and comprehensive understanding of a text. A fruitful reading requires its reader himself/herself to be cultivated to a great extent.

Meanwhile, what Sheng says about *Journey to the West* is also true of reading *A Dream of Red Mansions, the Water Marsh*, and *The History* of *the Three Kingdoms*.

¹ Zhu, Yixuan. 2012. *Compilation of Novels in Ming and Qing Dynasties* (Part II). Tianjin: Nankai University press, p.429.

² Ibid.

Thus, for example, as various scholars indicate, the last 40 chapters of *A Dream of Red Mansions* should be falsely penned by another author, Gao Ke, not written by Cao Xueqin himself, because they do not convey what Cao intended to say, if we read into the meaning of the texts of the first five chapters of the novel, in particular, Chapter 1 and Chapter 5.

All the same, as the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer said, "Understanding must be conceived as a part of the event in which meaning occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements-those of art and all other kinds of tradition-is formed and actualized." Here, "meaning" lies deeply beneath words and images, as well as lives in metaphors and symbols. It is the soul, essence, and substance of thought and ideas in a literature text.

Π

Notwithstanding, there will always be difficulties for readers to get to the meaning of a text without carefully and repeatedly reading the text. Moreover challenge is also that the ability of a reader to get to the meaning of a text depends importantly on the reader's knowledge and level of cultural understanding itself. That is to say, to understand the meaning of a text, a reader needs to read repeatedly the "object" of his enquiry—the texts, and to read broadly other related works and references, accumulating and fermenting knowledge, and from time to time, to compare books with each other in reading. A reader must go through the layer of "words" and "images" and the realm of having and having not, and ultimately comes to the essence of a text.\

Wu Congxian (吴从先)'s *Self-Discipline of Small Window*, Volume 1, in *Miscellaneous Book* thus reads: "*The Journey to the West* is a book of nature, *The Water Marsh is* a book about feeling. We can know these only by studying thoroughly the texts." As Wu Congxian pointed out, if a reader wants to get the meaning of a novel, the reader must explore thoroughly the text of the novel overcoming various difficulties and experiencing various back and forwards reading. If a reader wants to get the meaning of a text, the reader must read, more read, and continuously read.

True reading requires the ability to standing the hardship of reading. Thus, take *Journey to the West* as an example, Zhang Shushen's *New Comments on the Journey to the West* reads

³ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1991. *Truth and Methods*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Corporation, p.165.

⁴ Zhu, Yixuan, Liu, Yuchen. 2012. *Compilation of Journey to the West*. Tianjin: Nankai University press, p. 317.

⁵ Ibid.

Mencius said: "Before the Heaven is about to place a great responsibility on a person, it always first tests his resolution, exhausts his frame and makes him suffer starvation and hardship, frustrates his efforts so as to shake him from his mental latitude, toughen his nature and make good his deficiencies." Only by this way can we become a great sage. It is written in a positive way. In *Journey to the West*, San Zang had encountered all kinds of difficulties, was visited by various evils, and suffered great hardships before he came to the West of China to obtain the true Sutra and achieved the right results. It is written in a metaphor way. The text of *Mencius* is to say the main idea, and *Journey to the West* is a detailed discussion. To read *The Journey to the West* in the same way as reading *Mencius* is also acceptable.

Zhang Shushen quotes the well-known words of *Mencius* saying that if a person wants to be a person of great responsibility, he must build up his merits in deeds, and become wise; he must endure the unbearable suffering of life that may be beyond the capacity of ordinary people he must be tough and strong after the fatigue of his bones, the suffering of hunger and cold, the suffering of poverty, the crushing of everything as he wishes. *Mencius* spelled out this truth. And *Journey to the West* conveys this truth and thought.

In *Journey to the West*, in order to seek the true sutra, Tang Sanzang survived the 9 times 9 as 81 difficulties, withstood the devils and oddities of the devil, went through all kinds of hardships to reach the Western Heavenly Realm, and therefore achieved the true fruit. Tang Sanzang's experience is a metaphorical illustration of *Mencius*. Thus, words in *Mencius* as quoted above can be mutually corroborated and verified with *Journey to the West*. Zhang Shushen (张书绅) said: "The book *Fengshen* wrote about Taoist immortals, so it's peculiar; *Journey to the West* is about Buddhism, even more peculiar. Think carefully about *The Great Learning*, its ten chapters, words by words, we can see metaphors in the wonderful book." The moral is that *Journey to the West* is a novel about a journey to receive true Buddhist Sutra, symbolically connoting a journey of searching for human enlightenment. To accomplish the journey requires hard struggle. So is reading a text of classical literature. Reading a text of classical literature is a journey to search for truth, wisdom, and enlightenment. It requires hard struggle.

Zhang Shushen's comments illustrate that for readers, to arrive at truth, wisdom and insights which the text of a novel is intended to convey, readers must struggle hard; they must accumulate as much knowledge as possible; they must have as different and complete bibliographies as possible, and equally crucial these two ferment each other; only when readers have at utmost *checked things*—that is, examine thoroughly stories and events of a text—and *read carefully* the text can they know the essence, substance, and the deep points of the text. It is also like Yang

⁶ Ibid, pp.324-325.

⁷ Ibid, p. 335.

Chunhe (杨春和)'s "The preface to the original meaning of Journey to the West by Wu Yuan Zi" reads:

From images one searches for words, through words one searches for the meaning. Once one successfully grasps the meaning, s/he will forget the words. Once s/he successfully get the words, s/he will forget the images... It is akin to one forgets one's fish rod when one catches the fish. One forgets one's horse when one catches one's rabbit. Nothing is wrong about that⁸

That is to say, understanding the meaning of a text is the only objective of reading a text. Once the objective is achieved, one can forget the means and ways by which one achieves the objective.

To have a true understanding of a text, a reader must start with words and images but go beyond them at the end. A reader should seek words from image, seek meaning from words, advance step by step, and eventually comprehend fully the meaning of the text by heart, obtaining the fish and forgetting the fish rod, catching the rabbit and forgetting the horse, obtaining the words and forgetting the image. Thus, Wang Yang Jian (王阳健)'s book the Original Purpose of Journey to the West reads: "...... If we can get the purpose of 'Journey to the West' in words, and even more without words, we can get the purpose of 'Journey to the West', from surface into deeper layer, to the best......" "Meaning" is acquired not only in words, but also without words, from surface to deep, step by step, layer by layer, and ending at perfection.

Take as an example Chapter 66 of *The Plum in a Golden Vase* (《金瓶梅》). The text reads: "Refinement has been completed, the Immortal Huang left high seat....... The mass then all changed their crown clothes and the assistants arranged rows and collect ritual images." A commentary reads: "The Immortal's action is an act of the mass, nothing special. If one wants to be mysterious, one does not spell it out in words." Here, it is not that what is mysterious cannot be found in language. It is that what is mysterious should not be sought in words. Also, *Commentaries on Chapter 29 of The Plum in the Golden Vase of Wen Long Edition* reads: "It is difficult to write books, and to read, and much more difficult to comment. If one does not get it, one does not ask for details......." It explained that in order to grasp the meaning of a text, sometimes a reader must "not to seek to understand"; s/he "do not seek its

¹⁰ Qin, Xiurong. 1998. *The Plum in a Golden Vase: the Commentary Will Be School-based*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 911.

⁸ Ding, Xigen, 1996. *Preface and Postscript of Chinese Novels of All Dynasties* (Part II) [M]. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 1368.

Ibid, p. 1372.

¹¹ Zhu, Yixuan. 2012. Compilation of The Plum in a Golden Vase Compendium. Tianjin: Nankai University press, pp. 601-602.

details without knowing the truth". Where the meaning of a text is obtained, no words are needed anymore, and words should be forgotten.

The meaning of a text obtained by a reader's seeking is often not objective, but mixed with the subjective projections of readers and commentators of the text. Thus, Liang Qi Chao (梁启超)'s *On the Relationship between Novels and Communal Governance* (《论小说与群治关系》) advises readers as follows

S/he who reads novels should often put himself/herself into the book and become the protagonist in the book. S/he who reads *Ye Sou Pu Yan* must think of himself/herself as Wen Su chen. S/he who reads *The Story of the Stone* must think of himself/herself as Jia Bao yu S/he who reads *The Mark of Flower and Moon* must think of himself/herself as Han He Sheng and Wei Chi Zhu. S/he who reads *The Water Marsh* must think of himself/herself as the Black Whirlwind and Tattooed Monk Lu. Although readers do not admit, I do not believe it.¹²

The purpose of the recommended drill is to let a text speaks to its reader, not that a reader should read a text in terms of what s/he wants to read. It is for the reader to have the firsthand experience of the truth of a text.

Reading a text of classical literature always involves a reader's projection of the meaning of the text. Whether it is "investigatory reference" or "close reading", there is always a certain degree of a reader's projecting, which in turn makes it difficult to achieve absolute objectivity, but has certain subjectivity. Just as readers of novel often turn themselves into the protagonists in the book to see peoples and human affairs in in the novel, so is the author.

Xu Ke (徐珂)'s Writing a Book to Record My Life in his Paspalum Banknote (compiled) reads: "Many authors use their own life experiences and histories as their writing materials, such as Du ShaoQing in The Scholars is in effect the author Wu JingZi (吴敬梓) himself." Authors write books and refer to their own histories to record characters and arrange stories. In Note Lack Name, there is a detailed description of hidden characters in real life in A Flower in an Ocean of Sin as follows: "With regard to the names of hidden persons... in truth, Jin Wenqing (金雯青) is Hong WenQing (洪文卿), Gong HeFu (龚和甫) is Weng TongHe (翁同和) and Pan BaYing (潘八瀛) is Pan BoYin (潘伯寅)....." Because there are too many hidden persons in the book of A Flower in an Ocean of Sin (《孽海花》) listed by readers, the list here is not a full one. Whether the claim on concealed persons in the novel is true or false, it can be said that an author's intended meaning

¹² Zhu, Yixuan, Liu Yuchen. 2012. *Compilation of Water Margin Biography*. Tianjin: Nankai University press, p. 336.

¹³ Zhu, Yixuan. 2012. *Compilation of Novels in Ming and Qing Dynasties* (II). Tianjin: Nankai University press, p. 811.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.874.

and a reader's interpreted "meaning" both have a subjective involvement from their personal life experiences.

Subjectivity in reading is unavoidable. If we want to get "meaning", we need to jump out of the text. For example, Jin Sheng Tan (金圣叹)'s commentary on Chapter 16 of *The Water Marsh* reads: "Zhang Qing is like Cao Zheng, but he is a person who runs through the rope. Say: sincerity has, not carefully read ... The author therefore dyed the intermediate color to dizzy people. Reading just read the words, definitely not scholars." ¹⁵

As Jin Sheng Tan said, "to study " refers to the text and "close reading" cannot be "read with the book", which falls into the "trap" constructed by the text. Instead, we should jump out of the text and look at it with a cold eye. Again, He Shou ping commented on the eleventh volume, *Bookworm* in *A Strange Story of a Lonely Studio*": "How can it be not devoted to reading that can lead to official positions, money and beauties in books? Still, those who are really good at reading are those who can jump out the texts." That is to say, a good reader is the one who is e not limited to the text, and can jump out of the text.

Ш

Although *investigatory reference* and *close reading* are small micro-projects, they must have a broad macro-vision in order to avoid errors of one-sided generalization. In particular, a novel is an integrated one, and there can be many leading lines in a text which may appear to be insignificance at a first blast, but significance in careful reading. As Mao Zong Gang (毛宗岗) 's *Commentaries on Chapter 57 of The History of Three Kingdoms* says:

Dong Cheng (董承) and other seven people jointly pledged the oath, which has now been separated by more than 30 chapters. When Ma Teng (马腾) went to the area of the West region, there was no movement. Now suddenly appears here, and corresponds to the previous text secretly. Such a way of narration can really be described as an article is coherent like a sentence.¹⁷

Mao Zong Gangis' point is that the text of a novel is an integrated whole in which parts are united and run through each other; accordingly, it is not advisable for a reader to see only a tree, but not the forest itself in reading; that is to say, it is not

¹⁵ Chen, Xizhong, Hou, Zhongyi, Lu, Yuchuan. 1981. *Review of Water Margin Society*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 306.

¹⁶ Zhang, Youhe (ed.). 1962. *Title of a Collection of Bizarre Stories by Pu Songling of the Qing Dynasty*. Beijing: Zhonghua Publishing House, p. 1457.

The Guanzhong, 2006 The Romance of the Three Kingdoms with Mao Zonggang's Commentary (《毛批三国演义》). Tianjin: Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, p.420.

desirable for a reader to read individual part of a text as an isolated tree or island, without a view of the whole novel as a forest. Instead, only one has a full view of the whole novel can we read texts of individual parts of a novel in context and thus understand properly the meaning of a text. Here also, a reader's horizon must be broad, and thus understand that the writing is beyond the written language. On the one hand, in unfolding an event or the experiences of protagonists in a novel, the text of classical novel is situated in a broad horizon which the author envisions and thus to understand it, a read must have a compatible broad horizon. On the other hand, the text of a novel in Ming-Qing dynasties often make references beyond the text, and to understand the deep meaning of the text, a reader needs to have a horizon broad enough to appreciate the beyond-text reference. Again, Mao Zong Gang's commentaries on Chapter 17 of the History of Three Kingdoms reads as follows:

If a person loves soldiers but does not care for the people, such a person cannot be a general. If a person cherish generals but does not care about the people, such a person cannot be a king. Therefore, those who are good at leading soldiers must be able to manage soldiers and other soldiers such as Yu Jin. Those who are good at leading generals must be able to manage generals and other generals, such as Liu Bei. When Cao Cao fought and touched the wheat, we could see that Cao Cao could be a general. When Yuan Shu fought and robbed money all the way, we could see that Yuan Shu could not be king. The people are the foundation of the country, which is embodied in the novel's words many times. ¹⁸

If one is a general, one must cherish not only soldiers, but also the people. If one is a king, one must cherish not only generals, but also the people. The people are the foundation of a country. Only when they are firmly established, will the country be tranquil. Those who care for the people can be good generals and wise kings. From Mao Zong Gang's commentaries, we can see that one's reading of a novel should not be limited to the surface of the text, but should also understand the profound truth of peace and order. The most important meaning of the novel is the real valuable truth.

Another example is this. Li Zhi (李贽)'s commentaries on Chapter 2 of *Journey to the West* reads:

There are many fables in *Journey to the West*. Readers must not be careless. For example, in this chapter, "there is harmony between fire and water, so that people will not get sick"; "There is no difficulty in the world, just do it with your heart"; "Silence is golden, do not speak easily"; "Wherever you come, you will go back to where you are"; "It's all about the meaning of life." "

⁸ Ibid, p. 120.

¹⁹ Wu Chengen. 1981. *Journey to the West* with *Li Zhuowu's Commentary* (《李卓吾先生批点西游记》). Tianjin: Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, p. 16.

Journey to the West is full of fables, and small language often contains great meaning of life. Every word in Journey to the West implies profound meaning, which is the truth about life and contains rich and profound philosophy of life. It can be seen that little words contain cosmic wisdom.

IV

Whether it is the *investigatory reference* of the novel commentary in Ming and Qing Dynasties or the *close reading* of the text in Anglo-American literary, objectivity is still one of two norms.

First, the basis of investigatory reference and "close reading" is the objective things themselves. That is to say, protagonists and events in a novel often have their original models in real peoples and events in real life. Thus, for example, those protagonists in the History of the Three Kingdom have their original models in some real historical persons. The same can be said of the *Waster Marsh*. Thus, the anonymous person's *Pros and Cons of The Water Marsh* (《水浒传一百回文字优劣》)reads:

In the world, there is the *Water Marsh* first, and then Shi Nai and Luo Guan Zhong can write it with their brushes and ink. The names of characters in novels are made up according to characters in real life. For example, in the world, first there are such characters as prostitutes, then there are such characters as Yang Xiong's wife and Wu Song's sister-in-law in the novel. Procurer was the first in the world, and then there was Wang Po in this novel. In the world, there was the adultery between the slaves and the hostess, and then there was the adultery of Lu Jun Yi's wife in the novel. Other characters like Guan Ying, Chai Bo, Dong Chao, Xue Ba, Fu'an and Lu Qian in the novel are all lifelike. If these things had not happened first in the real world, even if the writers had worked hard for nine years, they could not have written such words.²⁰

As commentators have said, there are objective things in the world first, that is to say, *The Water Marsh* as a text exists first, there are such people and things as prostitutes, pimps, family slaves who adulterate with their masters, there are all kinds of people such as management, dispatch and so on, and then there are Shi Nai An and Luo Guan Zhong' The *Water Marsh*. Otherwise, even if the author "ponders over the wall for nine years and spits out a hundred liters of blood", he will not write a novel. If there are no things to study, no articles to read, we cannot do *investigatory reference* and *close reading*. It can be seen that the existence of objective things themselves is the basis of investigatory *reference* and *closing reading*.

²⁰ Chen, Xizhong, Hou, Zhongyi, Lu, Yuchuan. 1981. *Review of Water Margin Society*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 26.

Second, objectivity principle of investigatory *reference* and *close reading* requires true scholars and readers to do justice texts which in turn require degree of loyal to the text and solidly grounding oneself in texts as objective existence and abandoning subjective prejudice as much as possible. For example, Wen Long's commentaries on Chapter 32 of *The Plum in a Golden* Vase reads:

The speaker has no intention, and the listener has misunderstood the meaning of a text. This harm is still light. It is a matter that everyone has his own views and opinions. However, what we should grad against is as follows. When you love a person, you will not see any shortcomings of that person when you hate a person, you will not see any advantages from that person. This harm is very great because of stereotypes. If you love a person, you want him to live. If you hate him, you want him to die. You can't see the shortcomings of the person you love and the advantages of the person you hate. If you do this in your family, the elders will have no place for the children. In the officialdom, if the boss does so, the subordinates will have no future. The author expressed his own words, which was not told to me. Readers only see the characters and events in the text, without prejudice in their hearts, and look at the article with a rational eye, so that they can make comments.²¹

Wen Long pointed out that we read a text with subjective projection, just as a speaker speaks with his intention while and a listener listens the listener's intention. As Wen long indicated, with subjective projection, one may not read a text as it is, just as when one loves a person, one will not see his shortcomings. If one hates a person, one will see that person has no advantages. The harm is great because of prejudice. If one loves a person, one wants him to live. Reversely, when one hates a person, one wants him to die. When one loves a person, one cannot see the shortcomings of this person. When one hates a person, you cannot see the advantages of this person. For a family, if the elders do so, then the children have no place to live. For community, if the leaders do so, the subordinates will have no future. The same is true of reading. If readers read a text in terms of his/her subjectivity, s/he reads what s/he wants to read, not that which speaks to him/her. As Wen Long commented, "investigatory reference" and "close reading" should avoid subjective prejudice, adhere to the principle of objectivity, and the results of "study" and "close reading" are reasonable.

Thirdly, it is precisely the inherent requirement of the principle of objectivity of *investigatory reference* and *close reading* that makes it more important to study precisely and read carefully, and meticulous repetition is one of the important conditions to ensure the objectivity of the results of "careful reference" and "close reading". The effects of first reading and repeated reading are quite different. For example, commentaries on Chapter 3 of *The Scholars* of the Wo Xian Cao Tang

²¹ Zhu, Yixuan. 2012. *Compilation of The Plum in a Golden Vase Compendium*. Tianjin: Nankai University press, p.604.

edition reads: "'commented: "There is nothing wrong with Hu Lao's words. When he scolded him, he just liked him. It's because of his personality traits that he talks like this. If you look carefully, there is nothing abominable." As commentators have said, Hu's attitude toward Fan Jin was abhorrent when we first read. But if we looked at it carefully and repeatedly, we would feel that Hu did so out of his love for Fan Jin. We would not feel hate him anymore, but rather loved him.

In summary, this essay explores the common points between the doctrine of "investigatory reference" in literary commentaries of novels in Ming and Qing Dynasties and the doctrine of "close reading" Anglo-American literary criticism. It demonstrates that both doctrines aim at the pursuit of the meaning of a text; both doctrines emphasize hermeneutical reading of a text; both doctrines emphasize that to comprehend adequately a text, a reader's broad knowledge and horizon of mind is needed.

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²² Wu, Jingzi. 2010. *Review of Scholars' Foreign History Collection*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, p. 60.