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Research on The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty at the Intersection of Literature and History: A Review of A Study and Annotation of Yanagiwara Sakimitsu's *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty*

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Abstract: Professor Nie Youjun's book, *A Study and Annotation of Yanagiwara Sakimitsu's The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty*, breaks through the previous limitation of treating the text merely as a historical document. From a literary perspective and using the method of literature genealogy, it offers a multidimensional interpretation of the text. The first part delves into the literary characteristics of the diary and explores its underlying historical context. The second part provides a reliable foundation for future research through rigorous textual collation. The book not only reconstructs the historical scene of China and Japan interactions in the late Qing Dynasty, but also reflects on the differences in the modernization paths of the two countries through the lens of the "Foreign other insights". It demonstrates the research value of mutual illumination between literature and history and opens up new directions for thought in related fields.

Key words: *The Diary of Envoy to Qing Dynasty*; Yanagiwara Sakimitsu; literature genealogy; China's and Japan's modernization

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题目: 文史之间的《使清日记》研究：评聂友军《柳原前光〈使清日记〉研究与校注》

摘要: 聂友军老师所著《柳原前光〈使清日记〉研究与校注》突破了以往仅将《使清日记》视为史料的局限，从文学性视角出发，运用文学发生学的方法，对文本进行了立体化解

读。上编研究篇从文学特质深入其背后的历史语境；下编校注篇则通过严谨的文献整理，为后续研究提供了可靠基础。该书不仅还原了晚清中日交往的历史现场，也透过“异域之眼”反思两国近代化路径的差异，体现了文史互鉴的研究价值，为相关领域提供了新的思考方向。

关键词：《使清日记》；柳原前光；文学发生学；中日近代化

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The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty records, in diary form, the various sights and experiences of Yanagiwara Sakimitsu's diplomatic mission to the Qing Dynasty in 1870. The following year, in 1871, the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Friendship was signed. As a result, the book has often been regarded by researchers as a historical source connected with the signing of the treaty. While this is indeed one of the missions for which the diary was compiled, confining the scope of inquiry merely to the documentary value of the text undoubtedly flattens and reduces it to a single dimension. Professor Nie Youjun's *A Study and Annotation of Yanagiwara Sakimitsu's The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* (Peking University Press, 2024) attempts to re-excavate the text in a manner different from previous studies. Beginning from a literary perspective, it rereads *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* and conducts a three-dimensional and comprehensive examination—an innovative undertaking. The book is divided into two parts: the first is a study, and the second is a collation and annotation. Together, they offer a comprehensive view of the text.

1. The Pen of History and the Heart of Literature: The Aim of the Annotation of *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty*

The second part of *A Study and Annotation of Yanagiwara Sakimitsu's The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* focuses on the collation and annotation of the text. On the basis of punctuating the original text, it provides collation notes and annotations for redundant characters, missing characters, and the like. It must be said that the collation and annotation section reveals the rigorous and meticulous scholarly cultivation of the author, with every interpretation supported by precedents. Among prior studies of *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty*, no researcher has carried out such detailed collation and annotation work, which provides a convenient reading text for related future research.

The collation and annotation of *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* not only displays the author's diligence in textual research but is also indispensable groundwork for inquiry. The book was produced against the backdrop of cross-cultural exchange between modern China and Japan. Composed in classical Chinese by the Japanese envoy Yanagiwara Sakimitsu, it records both macro-level concerns of international diplomacy and the delicate private feelings of a stranger journeying to a foreign land. From the standpoint of the text itself, it is a hybrid

combining historical documentation with literary quality, intermingling the dual genes of "history" and "literature" in its bloodstream. Therefore, the collation and annotation of the text is both a restoration of the historical scene and an appreciation and recognition of its literary nature.

In terms of the historical landscape presented by *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty*, it offers a side glimpse of modern Sino-Japanese relations and the broader international situation. Although the text is merely Yanagiwara Sakimitsu's brief record of the journey to the Qing in 1870, it is not a frozen frame of history; what we see in it is the entanglement and interaction of pre-history and post-history—the modernization processes of China and Japan and the turbulent global order condensed within this historical event. For this reason, without the necessary collation notes on the historical events involved in *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty*, our understanding of the text would inevitably be narrow and obscure. The collation and annotation section supplements the necessary historical context. For instance, in the meeting on August 10 between the envoy mission and consuls of Britain, the United States, Germany, and other nations, *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* glosses over the Franco-Prussian War on the European continent in just a few brief strokes. In the collation and annotation section, the author provides explanations of appropriate length and detail concerning the various consular personnel involved and the situation of the war. From this we see that, although the narrative technique of *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* is sparing and restrained—indeed, this also stems from the need to "leave a basis for future verification when treaties are concluded another day" (Nie Youjun, 2024, p. 164)—beneath its calm and unruffled prose surge the global undercurrents of nineteenth-century rivalries. The journey of Yanagiwara Sakimitsu and his colleagues to the Qing was undoubtedly tinged with political aims, and so his sensitivity to global conflicts was acute; meanwhile, in interactions with Chinese officials, discussions about the actual circumstances and history of the two countries form an important thread embedded in the text. *A Study and Annotation* annotates historical facts encompassing the histories of both China and Japan as well as the global background, dissecting the entangled roots beneath the text and exhibiting the storms behind the words.

2. Perspectives on *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* from Both Literary and Historical Sides

For a long time, *The Diary* has been regarded as historical material for the study of modern Sino-Japanese interactions, and its documentary value for modern Sino-Japanese relations has been highly valued by researchers. The formation of this research perspective has its inherent rationale; indeed, as the author Yanagiwara Sakimitsu himself stated, the compilation of the book was indeed oriented toward future verification. However, we should also note that the use of the "diary" genre necessarily implies a subject participating in the construction of the text, which opens up the possibility of a literary research dimension. *A Study and Annotation*, beyond the mainstream perspective of historical-source research, reexamines *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing*

Dynasty from a literary dimension, viewing the text from both literary and historical sides.

The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty as a credible historical record is clearly the visible thread of textual research, emphasizing knowledge of late-Qing society and the history of Sino-Japanese interactions. In previous research, it has often been treated as some kind of corroboration for Sino-Japanese treaty negotiations, without being treated objectively as a text. *A Study and Annotation* also values the documentary aspect of the diary, but the author adopts a different posture in approaching history. Through the textual generation logic of *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty*, the author traces the gaze of Yanagiwara Sakimitsu and his companions along the way to the Qing, returning to the historical context of late-Qing society and discerning therein the different paths and processes by which China and Japan moved toward modernization. Chapter Three, "Case Studies of Interactions with Qing Officials and Foreign Consuls," through the mission's interactions with officials and consuls, illuminates the rapidly shifting world situation in the late Qing and the lag in China's participation in the modernization process. Chapter Five, "Multifaceted Records of Late-Qing Society," follows the migration of the Japanese mission's perspective along the route, observing the rich tapestry of late-Qing social customs. Chapter Six, "Conscious Intelligence Probing and Information Gathering," reflects, on the basis of various records by the Yanagiwara mission in the Qing, on the realities of late-Qing China and Japan's perceptions of the Qing. Through the "foreign eye" of the Japanese mission's observation of the Qing, the author enters the late-Qing context of "the great changes unseen in a thousand years," cutting into a dissection of historical depth from a novel angle. This process is profound and warm, offering new attempts in the study of *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* and a new perspective for modern Sino-Japanese studies.

In studying the literary qualities of the text, *A Study and Annotation* offers a meticulous reading of its content and structure, following the research approach of literature genealogy and dissecting the hidden literary thread of the diary—namely, the inner logic of Yanagiwara Sakimitsu's composition. Chapter One, "An Overview of the Yanagiwara Mission and *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty*," involves analysis of allusions, imagery, and language in the poetry, extending the discussion into literary aesthetics. Chapter Two, "The Main Thread of Multilateral Negotiations to Accomplish the Mission," focuses on the structural arrangement of the text, with the main threads being "negotiating matters of communication and trade," "realizing the demand for a plenipotentiary commissioner stationed in Shanghai," and "concluding the case of Qing subjects' forgery of Japanese transcripts." Chapter Four, "The Side Pleasure of Extensive Acquaintance with Chinese Scholars and Merchants," unfolds around the cultural life of the mission in the Qing, presenting the elegant scene of poetry and wine exchanges between Chinese and Japanese friends. Chapter Seven, "The Logic of Textual Generation in *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty*," seeks to uncover the purposes behind the narrative arrangements. Reading *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* as a literary text, to a certain extent, deconstructs its objectivity and authority as historical material and explores rich meanings behind the words, broadening the interpretive space of the text. Thus, *The Diary*

of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty is no longer reduced to a footnote material for arguments or a supporting echo for historical facts; the text itself comes alive. In *A Study and Annotation*, the China seen by Yanagiwara Sakimitsu and the voice of Yanagiwara as seen by the reader resonate together, intertwining into a multidimensional polyphony.

3. Endowing Utterance with Meaning: The Methodology of Literature Genealogy

In its study of the textual generation process, *A Study and Annotation* consciously adopts the methodology of "literature genealogy", which differs from the previous approach of treating the text as historical material and allows the text itself to be treated objectively.

"Literature genealogy" was proposed by Professor Yan Shaodang (2000, p. 2): "The genealogy of literature pays greater attention to the internal operating mechanisms of literature, thereby clarifying the inner logic by which each literary text becomes a unique literary form." This methodology seeks the origin of texts within "cultural contexts" while also paying attention to the "variation" phenomena that occur as literature develops dynamically with society. Literature genealogy focuses on the endogenous causes of manifest texts; its scholarly horizon both looks inward to examine the text and outward to investigate the contexts of its generation. To apply the methodology of literature genealogy to *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* is undoubtedly fitting. It was conceived in the context of cross-cultural exchange between China and Japan and produced amid the global tide of Asia's movement toward modernity. By tracing the textual generation logic, we can pull out a thread for understanding the text and Asia's modernization process, grasping a manageable clue amid a multifaceted, complex, and chaotic historical backdrop.

One use of literature genealogy in *A Study and Annotation* lies in questioning the objectivity of the text as historical material and excavating the implicit meanings within its traces of additions and excisions. Yanagiwara Sakimitsu also frankly states in his prefatory remarks: "Now I have excised what may be excised, in order to engrave it for my house, so that on a future day when treaties are concluded, there may be a basis for verification" (Nie Youjun, 2024, p. 164). This solidly proves that the cropping and elaboration of *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* as a literary text are all purposeful and serve as reliable bases for our search for origins. Combining case analyses, the book reveals the intentions behind such additions and excisions. Particularly compelling is the study of the image of Li Hongzhang in Chapter Seven; the author argues that Li Hongzhang's image in the diary was added after the fact and, drawing on numerous pieces of evidence supplemented by reasonable conjectures, attempts to recover the inner motive force behind the formation of his image. In the process of inference, the author returns to the historical context, pursuing the clues of textual generation step by step and seeking to encounter the actual historical reality. This process is reflective and powerful.

There are, however, some places in the book that warrant further discussion. For instance, the book mentions the meeting on August 17 between Yanagiwara Sakimitsu and Tu Zongying

and others, where the author observes a shift in narrative perspective in the diary—from Yanagiwara's perspective to an omniscient one—and argues that this shift incorporates the viewpoints of Tu Zongying and others, enhancing the work's documentary feel. The discovery of this narrative-perspective shift is very meticulous, because the special genre of "diary" often leads us to assume a priori that the work begins from the narrator's perspective. Yet looking back at *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty*, the first-person "I" (yu) is rarely mentioned. In the brush-talk between Zhang Xiuzhi and the Japanese envoy on August 12, when asked about Yanagiwara Sakimitsu's "courtesy name," Yanagiwara only then participates in the conversation in the first-person voice. Otherwise, Yanagiwara writes almost in a "zero-degree" mode of writing, concealing himself beneath the narrative, hardly passing judgment on events, merely acting as a "camera" along the journey to the Qing. This dispassionate mode of writing may have been intended to pursue the objectivity required for future verification, reflecting the documentary side of *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty*. However, the perspective shift on August 17 does not seem to be motivated by documentary intent but may have been mixed with a certain "private motive" of Yanagiwara's self-image construction. That is, because of considerations regarding the diary's later use as historical evidence, the Yanagiwara mission rarely had occasion to candidly disclose the self or to express emotions; thus, the third-party perspective of Tu Zongying and Chen Fuxun "seeing their stubbornness in not yielding" was used to highlight the firm resolve of the Yanagiwara mission in completing its diplomatic task and to shape a self-image of diligent dedication. The shaping of this image of the mission is also discussed in Chapter Seven of the book. Somewhat regrettably, however, the research on the rich connotations of the Yanagiwara mission's image is not yet systematic, which is an area where the book could be supplemented.

4. A Research Approach Combining Specific Cases and Broad Perspectives

A Study and Annotation does not confine itself to interpreting the text but also focuses on uncovering the broad historical context behind it. Taking *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* as an entry point, the book extends its vision to all aspects of late-Qing society and Sino-Japanese interactions, opening up a window for us to observe the turbulent domestic and international environment of the time, thereby revealing the unique vein of China's path to modernization.

When we distance ourselves from history and objectify China's modern history, we can gain new knowledge and reflection on China's modern course through the "foreign eye" of the Yanagiwara mission of 1870. *A Study and Annotation* follows Yanagiwara's perspective, while the author's recognition and awareness of late-Qing society also permeate the textual interpretation. For example, the brush-talks between Nakura Nobuatsu and Hou Pingqi reflect Chinese scholars' lack of knowledge about Japan; the descriptions of buildings in *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* reflect the issue of economic disparities between north and south; and Yanagiwara Sakimitsu's detailed records of the Dagu Forts reveal the lamentably low defense awareness of Chinese officials. Elevating analysis from individual cases to a holistic view of

universality, this expansion of scholarly vision breaks down the wall between literature and history, which is clearly conducive to our understanding of texts and history.

At the same time, the author's vision is not satisfied merely with following the shifting perspective of Yanagiwara's observations of China. *A Study and Annotation* turns its gaze toward reflecting on Yanagiwara's understanding of China, objectifying *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* as a text. In the process of textual analysis, we gain new perspectives on modern Japan as well. For example, Yanagiwara's earnest plea to Li Hongzhang for assistance in ratifying the treaty reflects, to a certain degree, the existence of voices among modern Japanese intellectuals advocating cooperation with China against the West; the contrast between the Japanese deliberately recording Qing garrison information when coming to the Qing and the wholly unguarded attitude of Qing officials reveals Japan's preparations for invasion and the Qing's dullness in military defense. Therefore, through the China seen by Yanagiwara Sakimitsu, we can gain understanding of the late Qing's interior from the perspective of the other; while a long-distance retrospective view of *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* provides us with a perspective on the external environment of the Qing dynasty. This crisscross and complementary research gaze together constitutes the warp and weft of China's modernization process, giving us a relatively clear positioning of the special historical phase of the late Qing.

After taking the historical cross-section of Yanagiwara Sakimitsu's mission to the Qing in 1870 and unfolding it against the broad backdrop of the encounter and conflict between Eastern and Western civilizations, we discover that China's modernization process lagged behind Japan's by a step. *A Study and Annotation* also points out the late-Qing Chinese scholars' lack of a global vision and their inability to know themselves and others. The author also attempts to diagnose the underlying ailment, mentioning in the conclusion: "The different cultural characteristics of China and Japan and the divergent domestic and international environments at the time of their movement toward modernity are important factors leading to the divergent paths of modernization in the two countries" (Nie Youjun, 2024, p. 150). It must be said that this line of thought is fairly comprehensive, looking inward to the differences in cultural roots between China and Japan and outward to the global environment. However, perhaps owing to considerations of the book's overall layout, the discussion of this aspect feels somewhat hurried. Research on the grand question of how the modernization processes of China and Japan diverged may require even more thorough and detailed argumentation.

In sum, *A Study and Annotation*, beginning from a literary point of departure, reconstructs an interpretive space for the text within a literary perspective—an attempt that is feasible, innovative, and valuable. With literary antennae, the author probes various possibilities inside and outside the text, touches the pulse of China and Japan's modernization processes, and, drawing on the past to understand the present and using history as a mirror, extends the direction of reflection to contemporary China a hundred years later, pointing toward how our current path of Sinification should proceed. This line of thinking embodies humanistic scholars' concern for history and reality, and the study of *The Diary of an Envoy to Qing Dynasty* thus acquires renewed significance in being reexamined a century later.

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