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A Glimpse of Historical Anthropology: Take the Representatives of David Ke, Zheng Zhenman and Zhao Shiyu as an Example

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Abstract: This paper takes the four works of David Ke, Zheng Zhenman, and Zhao Shiyu and discusses the research ideas, subjects, and methods of historical anthropology. Through the micro-level analysis of clan research, it reveals the evolution of local social history and context. David's Emperor and Ancestors discusses the formation, development, and decline of clans in South China, emphasizing the role of clans as production control organizations; Zheng Zhenman's Fujian Family Organization and Social Changes in the Ming and Qing Dynasties analyzes the evolution of family structure, clan organization, and their social networks, and Zhao Shiyu's Carnival and Small History explores the historical changes of North China society from the perspective of local ritual traditions and temple fairs. This paper aims to understand social history from the perspective of historical anthropology through clan research and to reflect on its research paradigm.

Keywords: historical anthropology; Ke David; Zheng Zhenman; Zhao Shiyu

1. Introduction

We believe that historical anthropology is a research method that examines the daily lives of people at the grassroots level, is based on regional social research, and integrates it into the overall historical context [1]. Since the 1990s, the research methods of historical anthropology have been widely adopted by scholars in mainland China. David Ke, Zheng Zhenman, Zhao Shiyu, Liu Zhiwei, and Chen Chunsheng are regarded as pioneers. Taking South China as a field of study, they first explained the evolution of clans and regional economic history through historical anthropology, and then expanded to other research perspectives, such as ritual traditions, ancestral halls, commemorative rituals, and spatial practices.

This paper selects four representative works by David Ke, Zheng Zhenman, and Zhao Shiyu as research objects, aiming to preliminarily understand the research ideas, subjects, and methods of historical anthropology by analyzing these works. At the same time, this paper uses clan research as the starting point and carefully discusses the evolution of local social history from the micro level in order to understand the overall framework of historical anthropology on a macro level and analyze how different scholars use the "tool" of historical anthropology to explain history and restore the historical scene.

Through the analysis of these works, this paper aims not only to reveal the unique contribution of historical anthropology in the study of clans, but also to explore the application and expansion of this research method in different regions and themes. Historical anthropology extends beyond the study of clans to include ritual traditions, ancestral halls, ceremonial sites, mental history, ethnic history, dialects, and so on. This paper hopes to provide readers with a comprehensive perspective on historical anthropology through these works and stimulate further thinking and exploration of this research method.

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2. David Ke: The Emperor and His Ancestors: The State and Clans in South China

Unlike conventional interpretations of this book, we propose that its central arguments should be divided into three parts: first, "the formation of systems and clans"; second, "the remodeling and restructuring of clan structures"; and third, "the standardization of military and clan systems, as well as the development of commerce". The core idea is to explore how the formation, development, and decline of clans serve as the backdrop for the local social history of the Ming and Qing Dynasties [2].

Drawing on Friedman's research, the author places the clan within the broader historical development trends and constructs a holistic framework to examine the interactions between local and societal relations in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

2.1. *The Formation of the System and the Clan*

The author believes that the implementation of the Jia system in the Ming Dynasty led to the formal rise of Lingnan clans during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Through the genealogies and documents of the He, Deng, and Hai clans, he demonstrated that Lingnan society in the early Ming Dynasty was controlled by local elites. The author argues that the administrative arrangements of the Ming Dynasty gave legal significance to clan etiquette rules, such as inheritance rules. Therefore, household registration became a means of land distribution.

We believe that the combination of institutional structures and etiquette represents both continuity and innovation. Using the stone inscriptions of the Rong clan tree and the Li ancestral hall as examples, David Ke argues that the use of clan structure is closely related to Neo-Confucian etiquette. From this, we can see that the ethics advocated by Neo-Confucianism served as a key foundation for clan ancestor worship.

At the same time, influenced by Neo-Confucian thought, official regulations clearly stipulated ancestor worship: civilians could only offer sacrifices to their parents and grandparents up to four generations. In the early Ming Dynasty, the identity hierarchy prescribed by law and practiced by local elites was strictly observed. Through the system of "compiling households and uniting the people" in the local system, land property and military service were allocated according to rank within the clan, achieving the combination of ancestor worship and the domestic system.

At this point, the clan formed its internal structure through the imperial system, common ancestry, and shared ritual practices, and the clan became the "institutional entity" controlling land production.

2.2. *Reconstruction and Gentrification of Clan Structure*

We believe that the implementation of the Lijia system was only the first step in the development of the clan. A subsequent series of events, such as the rebellion of Huang Xiaoyang, the Foshan Defense Alliance, the implementation of the Single Whip Law, and the reform of the "Great Discussion", further strengthened and refined the clan structure.

The rebellion of Huang Xiaoyang exposed deficiencies in the implementation of the Jia system, prompting local authorities to reassess their approach. David Ke selected Foshan as a case study and proposed that the Foshan Defense Alliance empowered the floating population, such as "households" through institutions like the "Nine Societies" "Twenty-Four Shops" and "Eight Maps" leading to an expansion in household organization.

Furthermore, the implementation of the Single Whip Law shifted the taxation system from labor obligations to monetary payments, transitioning from household registration-based labor requirements to land-based taxation. For clans, the registration of land served to establish their legal ownership over property, further reinforcing their role as "production control organizations". Under the combined influence of orthodox status and land ownership, household registration was no longer merely a tool for the state to levy taxes;

rather, local communities could leverage it for their own benefits through strategic clan management.

The Lijia system not only facilitated the development of clans but also accelerated the rise of the gentry class. This was also a key aspect of the expansion of the dynastic state's influence. David Ke provided the examples of the Foshan Huo lineage and the Shatin lineage: the Foshan Huo family strengthened its clan structure through success in the imperial examination system, encouraging members to pursue official careers as a source of clan prestige. Meanwhile, the Shatin lineage incorporated official Confucian rituals into local governance, reflecting the deepening influence of imperial ideology on clan organization.

2.3. Standardization of the Army and Clan and the Development of Business

We believe that the implementation of the Lijia system was only the first step in the development of the clan. Subsequent events, such as the Huang Xiaoyang uprising, the Foshan Defense Alliance, the implementation of the Single Whip Law, and the "Great Discussion" reform, further strengthened and refined the clan structure.

The chaos caused by Huang Xiaoyang exposed inadequacies in the implementation of the Jia system. David Ke selected Foshan as a case study and proposed that the Foshan Defense Alliance empowered the floating population, such as "households," through institutions like the "Nine Societies", "Twenty-Four Shops" and "Eight Maps" leading to an expansion of household organization. Additionally, the implementation of the Single Whip Law shifted the dynasty's labor policies from corvée labor to tax payments in silver, transitioning from household-based taxation to land-based taxation. For clans, land registration played a crucial role in establishing their legal ownership of land, further reinforcing their function as "production control organizations". With the combined influence of orthodox status and land ownership, household registration was no longer merely a tool for the state to levy taxes; rather, local communities could also leverage it to secure economic and social benefits.

The Lijia system not only facilitated the development of clans but also accelerated the rise of the gentry. This also reflected the expanding influence of the dynastic state. David Ke provided examples of the Foshan Huo lineage and the Shatin lineage: the Foshan Huo family strengthened its clan structure through success in the imperial examination system, encouraging members to pursue official careers as a source of clan prestige. Meanwhile, the Shatin lineage incorporated official Confucian rituals into local governance, reflecting the deepening influence of imperial ideology on clan organization.

3. Zheng Zhenman: Family Organization and Social Changes in Fujian in Ming and Qing Dynasties

The book is mainly divided into four parts: family structure, clan structure, the evolution process of clan, and the reasons for the change and development of clan organization.

3.1. Family Structure

Through a systematic study of Minnan genealogies, Zheng Zhenman categorized family structures into three types: the "big family", which consists of two or more married couples; the "small family", which includes only one married couple; and the "incomplete family", which lacks a spousal relationship [3]. His research concluded that large families in Fujian typically lasted only three to four generations. As family size expanded, internal conflicts arose due to various factors, making family separation an inevitable trend. Consequently, the traditional family structure disintegrated and was gradually replaced by clan organizations.

3.2. *Clan Structure*

Among the clan members, although there may be nominal blood relations, such as those of a "common family" or proposed blood ties, the social relations that regulate and restrict clan members may include blood relations, geographical relations, or interest-based relations. Therefore, Zheng Zhenman categorizes clan organizations into three types: the "inheritance clan" based on blood relations; the "dependent clan" based on geographical relations; and the "contractual clan" based on interest-based relations.

The "inheritance clan" refers to different branches and generations of people, and their status within the inheritance clan varies. Zheng Zhenman believed that the primary function of this clan relationship was to carry on the family line, with a strong focus on the inheritance of wealth and social status. However, with the development of the times, this clan relationship was the first to be abandoned.

The "affiliated clan" can evolve from the "inheritance clan", and its transformative force lies in the division of wealth between the rich and poor. In such clans, relationships are generally formed through cohabitation, or the minority group may "lead the clan" by donating money to reorganize clan organizations that have either disintegrated or are about to disintegrate, through repairing ancestral tombs and building ancestral temples.

The "contractual clan" means that the rights and obligations of the clan depend on the established contractual relationship, and it is generally an organization based on interest-based relations. In the contractual clan, the rights and interests of the clan can be inherited across generations, transferred, bought, or sold independently. The formation of the contractual clan is primarily related to joint investments in public undertakings. As a mutually beneficial organization, the clan serves as a necessary supplement to both the inherited and dependent clans. The contractual clan has become more widespread in environments with high commercialization and limited social mobility, and has emerged as the dominant form of clan organization.

3.3. *The Evolution Process of the Clan*

Zheng Zhenman describes three kinds of family structure and three kinds of clan structure for us, but in the process of historical development, they cannot be unchanged. Therefore, Zheng Zhenman presented the intersection of a variety of clan structures through the genealogy study of the two regions. The clan organizations in the mountainous areas of northwest Fujian have completely experienced the historical process of "inherited clan" formed from the big family division, and the "dependent clan" to "contract clan" formed by the difference between the rich and the poor of the children within the clan. The new immigrants from Taiwan in the Qing Dynasty, however, had different development veins. The early immigrants had different families and bought real estate together, thus forming a "contractual clan". As time went by, the first batch of immigrants had descendants, and their clan structure evolved into "inherited clan". Due to the great difference between the wealth and the poor of the children of the clans at all levels, the leaders of the rich clan became the local gentry, which contributed to the formation of "dependent clan".

3.4. *Reasons for the Change and Development of the Clan Organization*

After presenting the complex situation in the process of clan development, Zheng Zhenman analyzed the reasons for the change of clan organization. Zheng Zhenman argued that after the Song Dynasty, people 'ignored official regulations and the demands of a few Neo-Confucian scholars.' As a result, family lineages could be established at will, leading to the emergence of 'dependent clans' and 'contract clans.'

Zheng Zhenman believes that the link to maintain the development of clan is "the ownership of property relations", which is marked by the formation and development of "ethnic property". In order to keep the family prosperous, we must keep enough "ethnic property" when the big family is separated. As time goes by, the proportion of "ethnic

property" increases, which makes the ethnic property accumulate more and more. As a result, the economic function of the family organization is increasingly enhanced, and gradually evolved into an economic entity with the main purpose of profit. However, the property ownership within the family often changes due to the polarization between the rich and the poor of the clan, which inevitably leads to the corresponding reorganization of the family organization and the change of the land distribution mode, thus contributing to the evolution of the inheritance clan to the contract clan.

4. Zhao Shiyu: Carnival and Daily Life, Big History and Small History

Zhao Shiyu's *Carnival and Daily: Temple Fair and Folk Society* since the Ming and Qing Dynasties and *Big History and Small History: Ideas, Methods, and Practice of Regional Social History* can be considered representative works in the anthropology study of North Chinese history [4]. These two books are selected for their diverse research objects and perspectives, richer historical materials, and research areas that complement the works mentioned above [5].

4.1. Legend Research

Mention of Zhao Shiyu, his legendary research is widely known. In *Big History and Small History*, Zhao Shiyu takes three legendary motifs and their variants as clues, after researching the origin, and shows us the mentality of the people in North China and the evolution of national identity in different historical periods.

In the legend of "Shanxi Great locust tree immigrants", the people deconstructed their own memories and reconstructed the legend that met the needs of that time. After the Song Dynasty, the people of North China mixed with aliens led to the mentality of "not our ethnic group, their hearts will be different". Zhao Shiyu found that such legends and variants recorded in folk literature were mostly in the remodeling period of Han ethnic consciousness in Ming and Qing Dynasties and the structure period of nationalist consciousness in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China. Thus, legend becomes the collective memory of its cultural identity when cohesion is most needed.

In "water" and "steal treasure" legend, Zhao Shiyu with the same ideas, they thought that "water" shows in the water conservancy system is difficult to manage area, the people through the dragon king belief build to the ethnic legend, and draw the outline of a village of different groups. The differences between different versions of the legend are also closely related to the relationship between the Han nationality and other ethnic groups, and between the south and the north in different historical periods.

In "Carnival and Daily", Zhao Shiyu mentioned that "March 19 is the birthday of the sun". The sun's birthday is the day when the Chongzhen Emperor committed suicide. In order to reasonably remember the motherland under the background of the Qing Dynasty, people can only package it with specious legends. This is a reflection of a historical memory that is endowed with legitimacy by folk texts.

4.2. Study of the Gentry and Clans

Unlike the previous two studies on clans, Zhao Shiyu's research on clans uses the turning point of the gentry in the temple fair controversy as an entry point to discuss the development process of Jiangnan clans during the Qing Dynasty from the perspective of the gentry. In the mid-Ming Dynasty, the Wu family gained recognition from local towns by "dreaming of deities", gradually shaping a sacred system that symbolized their importance in the community. He also argued that, with the development of industry, commerce, and the increasing mobility of the population in the late Qing Dynasty, clans could no longer be maintained solely by blood relations, but rather by interest-based connections. This aligns with David's argument that "the clan is a property control organization" and Zheng Zhenman's theory that "many clans will transition from dependent clans to contractual clans".

4.3. National Worship and Folk Belief

In both books, Zhao Shiyu took the belief in Beijing's Bixia Yuanjun as a starting point to explore the interactive relationship between state worship and folk beliefs.

Bixia Yuanjun was incorporated into the national worship system of the Taishan Emperor and was considered "quasi-zhengsi" before the Ming Dynasty. After the belief gained popularity in Beijing during the Ming Dynasty, centered around the Dongyue Temple, it contributed to the formation of the "Five Peaks" system to protect the capital. Zhao Shiyu argues that Ming Dynasty inscriptions bore a strong official influence, but they were primarily limited to eunuchs, officials, and dignitaries.

In the Qing Dynasty, Zhao Shiyu focused on the expansion of folk sacrifices, alongside imperial participation. In particular, he emphasized the erection of monuments and the pilgrimage activities of the folk temple associations at Jinding Miaofeng Mountain and Xidi Yadi Ji Mountain. With the decline of the country in the late Qing Dynasty, the people expressed their sentiments through temple fairs and folk activities.

Zhao suggested that while the relationship between the state and the people appeared harmonious, in reality, they subtly influenced each other's needs to maintain a balance. The story of the Black Mountain Club and the "Lu Ban Association", which illustrate the interaction between eunuchs and the people in *Carnival and Daily Life*, both reflect this idea.

4.4. Research on Temples, Temple Fairs and Civil Society

The "temple fair" discussed by Zhao Shiyu is the concrete embodiment of the folk "carnival" spirit. In *Carnival and Daily*, Zhao Shiyu devoted a lot of time to introduce the relationship between north China temple fair and social space, and analyzed the mentality of civil society behind it.

Temples are inextricably linked to folk culture, and the most important reason why any religion can be widely believed by the people is the continuous "secularization". From the perspective of believers, they are more about the practicality of religion, namely the belief function of the gods, such as whether they satisfy their personal prayer. Therefore, Zhao Shiyu stressed that the civil society's choice of temples in the sacred space is out of utilitarianism and pragmatism, rather than pure belief.

Temple fair is the bearing place of the people's carnival spirit, which has primitive, national and anti-standardization. In terms of primitivism, he believes that the temple fair embodies the remains of the original religious spirit in the hearts of the people, which is embodied in the fear of gods and evil spirits. In terms of universal and anti-standardization, the temple fair breaks the hierarchy to some extent, giving everyone the opportunity to participate in it, which it believes enhances the cohesion and identity of civil society.

In addition to the basic functions of religious worship, temple fairs also have the functions of entertainment, trade and playing a central role. There are two conditions for its development: one is the religious prosperity and rich religious activities, the other is the commodity currency economy is developed and the commercial activities are ordinary. This makes the temple a religious, economic and cultural center within a region, with a positive role in the construction of sacred space.

5. Reflection and Evaluation

5.1. "Outlines" Historical Anthropology

The four books mentioned in this article are highly representative works of mainland Chinese anthropology. From these works, we can roughly understand the research ideas, problem awareness, and historical data foundation of historical anthropology.

In Zhao Shiyu's book, he discusses the concept and method of "new social history," which advocates that researchers observe the context of social development from the bottom up, thus forming an echo and contrast with the history of the "upper class" kings and

generals. It does not attempt to "separate" ethnic groups in a region from politics and institutions, as anthropology does. Instead, it seeks to portray how the people react when the state's influence extends to them. We believe this reflects the nature of society: obedience, rebellion, and yet, a "dialogue" with the state.

Folk beliefs function similarly. The state makes policies for local society according to the ritual system, either by dividing proper shrines from temples of prostitution or by regulating the behavior habits and values of the local people through "great gift discussions". When people receive official "discipline", they may obey, but they understand the system with a "self-interest" attitude.

The same applies to clans. The works of David and Zheng follow this idea. The state governs local society through domestic systems. In the specific implementation process, the common people promoted the construction and development of the clan with the pursuit of ancestor worship and the distribution of family property. During this process, the clan gradually divided into leaders and subordinates. The leaders established their "legitimacy", which contributed to the rise of the gentry. The gentry actively promoted the imperial examination system to enable their descendants to enter the official system. Thus, civil society and the state engaged in a "dual-track" dialogue.

5.2. The "Clan Paradigm" of Historical Anthropology

This paper discusses the "signboard" of historical anthropology—clan research. Ke David and Zheng Zhenman provide us with two distinct yet complementary paradigms of clan research.

As mentioned in the preface of *The Emperor and The Ancestors*, clan study is integrated into the broader context of Chinese history, establishing a framework for understanding the clan in southern China. According to David, the clan is a complex product of the etiquette reforms of various dynasties and the jia system in the Ming Dynasty. Its nature as a "production control organization", gradually shaped by the times, makes it a powerful bridge between local and national communication. David integrates the clan into the entire historical context to explore its organic nature and creatively uses the concept of Friedman's idea that "the clan is the organization of production control."

If David Ke outlines the magnificent social history of South China through clan discussions, Zheng Zhenman's research places more emphasis on the "inward" exploration of the clan's growth mechanism, structure, and its social network. Zheng's goal is to center the clan and explore the factors behind it. He begins by discussing the structure of different clan forms from a family perspective and then introduces the development of the clan in different historical social environments, using individual cases as examples. Based on this, Zheng explores the social network underlying the clan.

We believe that the clan research paradigms of Chinese mainland historical anthropology are constructed by these two scholars, and their works should be viewed as complementary. In the last chapter of *The Emperor and His Ancestors*, David Ke mentions the idea of "going out of South China" and hopes future scholars will build new social history research frameworks. In *Big History and Small History*, Zhao Shiyu highlights the limitations of the current clan research paradigm in studying social history. Historical anthropology should not focus solely on clan studies but can also explore other aspects such as folk beliefs, temples, sacred spaces, mentalities, ethnic groups, dialects, and more. Zhao Shiyu's two books make significant contributions to these efforts.

6. Summary

Through the four works of historical anthropology selected in this paper, we can gain a preliminary understanding of the research methods, problem consciousness, and research objects in historical anthropology. We can also explore social history from the perspective of historical anthropology, with a focus on clan research. Additionally, we can observe the distinct characteristics of historical anthropology research in different regions.

The research of South China, represented by scholars like David Ke and Zheng Zhenman, is the most developed, covering a wide range of topics such as clans, folk beliefs, temples, and gentry. Historical anthropology is actively expanding beyond the "experimental field" of South China. Scholars such as Zhao Shiyu are pioneering the application of historical anthropology research methods in North China, focusing primarily on social history and the water conservancy legends of Shanxi Province. The study of historical anthropology in Jiangnan and Shandong provinces is also flourishing.

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