

The Dissemination Practice of Shixianshu in the Western Regions during the Qing Dynasty

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Abstract: The dissemination and implementation of Shixianshu (the official almanac) in the Western Regions during the Qing Dynasty is a typical example of the cross-regional spread of Central Plains calendrical culture. This article takes the multilingual Shixianshu as the starting point and, combined with archival materials and physical relics, systematically examines the westward dissemination path of the calendar and its cultural shaping of Western Regions society. By simultaneously publishing Shixianshu in Manchu, Chinese, and Mongolian languages, it not only carried cultural symbols such as the twenty-four solar terms and agricultural time sequences of the Central Plains but also accommodated the monthly-order traditions of nomadic tribes, forming a cross-cultural dialogue pattern of “one calendar integrating three customs”. From the Hami Oasis, where farming was arranged according to the solar terms, to the Ili River Valley, where herders selected grazing areas by observing celestial phenomena, Shixianshu reconstructed the daily life rhythms of the people in the Western Regions based on scientific data. The concurrent use of the “Kitchen God” calendar paintings and the official almanac further promoted the in-depth integration of the Han cosmology and the folk customs in the Huijiang region. This process reveals that the dissemination of the calendar during the Qing Dynasty, through the “technology-symbol” dual-coding strategy, transformed the time order into a cultural integration bond, constructing a shared time-cognition framework for diverse ethnic groups. Its multi-modal text strategy still has implications for contemporary cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Qing Dynasty; Shixianshu; Cultural dissemination; Western regions

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1. The Shixianshu of the Qing Dynasty and its courier system

In 1644, after the Qing army entered the Shanhai Pass, Adam Schall von Bell, a German Jesuit, revised and improved the Chongzhen Lishu (Calendar of Chongzhen) compiled by Xu Guangqi and others in the Ming Dynasty and then presented it to the central government of the Qing Dynasty. The Qing government named the Chongzhen Lishu presented by Adam Schall von Bell as Xiyang Xinfu Lishu (New Western-style Calendar), and based on this, a daily almanac was compiled, which was the “Shixian Calendar”^[1].

In July of the first year of the Shunzhi reign (1644), when discussing the naming of the new calendar (subsequently

promulgated as Shixianshu), the Ministry of Rites proposed a name-change request for nationwide implementation. Prince Rui pointed out: “It should be named Shixian to show the imperial court’s intention of following the will of heaven and governing the people”^[2]. Throughout the Qing Dynasty, Shixianshu was published in three languages — Manchu, Chinese, and Mongolian, and was accordingly promulgated across the country.

The Shixianshu compiled by the Imperial Observatory included different versions, such as the Shixianshu for Imperial Review, the Promulgated Shixianshu, the Qizheng Shixianshu, and the Yuewuxing Xiangju Shixianshu^[3]. Among them, the Shixianshu for Imperial Review was presented to the emperor for reading and had Manchu and Chinese versions. The Promulgated Shixianshu was used for nationwide promulgation. The Qizheng Shixianshu and the Yuewuxing Xiangju Shixianshu were mainly used by astronomical institutions such as the Imperial Observatory. The Qizheng Shixianshu, also known as the Qizheng Calendar, had Manchu and Chinese versions. The Yuewuxing Xiangju Shixianshu, also known as the Lingfan Calendar, was renamed the Yuewuxing Xiangju Shixianshu during the Qianlong reign.

After the preliminary work, such as measurement, was completed, the emperor and the civil and military officials in the capital would welcome the solemn annual New Moon-Proclamation Ceremony on the first day of the tenth lunar month^[4]. For distant local provinces, the rulers of the Qing Dynasty chose to deliver Shixianshu to local officials through the courier-station system. According to relevant Qing-Dynasty archival records, the courier-delivery of Shixianshu involved multiple institutions and departments, such as the Imperial Observatory and the Ministry of War as follows.

“This year, the number of Shixianshu for the 38th year of the Qianlong reign needs to be determined. Whether it should be the same as last year or with some increase or decrease, our institution dare not decide without permission. We hereby consult your department and hope for your instructions. In addition to preparing the Shixianshu in the required quantity, we will also send a letter to the Ministry of Works to prepare splints and felt bags... It is found that there are a total of 16 places, including the military-camp administrative ministers... They should receive a total of 16 copies of the Manchu, Chinese, and Mongolian annotated Shixianshu for the 38th year of the Qianlong reign. Since the number to be issued to each place has been adjusted and issued according to the number copied out by the Grand Council this year, it should still be handled according to the number of the 37th year. We will reply with a letter and issue the notice. The Imperial Observatory should seal and pack the Shixianshu as usual and send it to our department for further distribution. Also, inform the Grand Council”^[5].

Judging from the official letter in August of the 37th year of the Qianlong reign (1772) regarding the distribution of the Shixianshu for the 38th year to places such as Uliastai and Ili, after the Ministry of War sent notice letters to the recipients, the Imperial Observatory prepared the required Shixianshu according to the specified numbers. As usual, 10 copies of the Manchu, Mongolian, Chinese, and red-annotated Chinese versions were prepared for each place. Then, the Imperial Observatory sent a letter to the Ministry of Works and dispatched personnel to collect items such as splints, felt bags, and hemp ropes for packing the Shixianshu. After sealing, it was handed over to the Ministry of War. Finally, the Ministry of War was responsible for forwarding the Shixianshu.

2. The dissemination process of Shixianshu in the Western Regions during the Qing Dynasty

According to the Veritable Records of Emperor Shengzu of the Qing Dynasty, as early as the 52nd year of the Kangxi reign, Hami and various Mongolian tribes submitted a petition to the Qing court, requesting to be included

in Shixianshu. Emperor Kangxi issued an edict approving the proposal to include Hami and other regions in Shixianshu: “In the 52nd year (of the Kangxi reign), it was approved that the Oirat, Khalkha, and other Mongolian tribes, as well as 15 places in the Hami region... The times of the sun’s rising and setting and the solar terms should be added to Shixianshu and issued uniformly”^[6]. Therefore, the Shixianshu of the Qing Dynasty completed the first step of its dissemination in the Western Regions, which was of pioneering significance, indicating the further westward spread of ancient Chinese calendrical culture.

During the Qianlong reign, Emperor Qianlong ordered the promulgation of Shixianshu in the areas formerly under the rule of the Dzungar Khanate: “The various Dzungar tribes have all been incorporated into the territory. The celestial phenomena, the times of the sun’s rising and setting, and the moments of the day-night and solar terms in these areas should be included in Shixianshu, and the imperial calendar should be bestowed”^[7]. After Emperor Qianlong’s edict, relevant work was gradually carried out, and many new locations were added to Shixianshu:

It was also approved that 20 places, including the Mongolian tribes in Ili and other places, as well as Barkol and Turpan: Barkol, Ili, Habutak, Baidak, Mulei, Jimusa, Urumqi, Tarbagatai, Anjihai, Zhair, Bortala, Lukqun, Ushakthar, Karashahr, Korla, Joldus, Konggis, Hash, Kazak, and Turpan. The times of the sun’s rising and setting and the solar terms should be added to Shixianshu and issued uniformly^[8].

Except for Ili, which was included in Shixianshu by imperial edict in the 20th year of the Qianlong reign, most of the other places were newly added this time, such as Mulei, Jimusa, Tarbagatai, Bortala, and Karashahr, south of the Tianshan Mountains^[9]. Generally speaking, the dissemination and coverage of Shixianshu in the Western Regions further expanded. Some areas south of the Tianshan Mountains had already been included in Shixianshu before. This expansion mainly focused on incorporating the remaining areas of southern Xinjiang, promoting the dissemination and popularization of Shixianshu in the oasis areas of the Tarim Basin. At the same time, through the promulgation of Shixianshu, the Qing court aimed to strengthen the sense of identity of all ethnic groups towards the unified dynasty.

During the Qianlong reign, the Old Torghut tribe, which had long suffered oppression from Tsarist Russia, arrived at the Ili River. Subsequently, Emperor Qianlong ordered the proper resettlement of the returning Torghut people. The following year, the places where the Torghut people lived were included in Shixianshu one by one. The number of groups covered by the dissemination of Shixianshu increased, and the dissemination of calendrical culture spread to a deeper level as follows.

“Twenty-four places of the Torghut tribe... including the Torghut tribe in the Bulgan River area... the Khoit tribe, the Torghut tribe in Hoboksar, the Torghut tribe in Kulja, the Irtysh River area, Zaysan Lake, the Torghut tribe in Zhair, the Torghut tribe in Jinghe... The times of the sun’s rising and setting, solar terms, and moments should be added to Shixianshu and issued uniformly”^[10].

Regarding the various Torghut tribes, the Qing court decided to resettle them in the southern foothills of the Altai Mountains, the northern and southern parts of the Junggar Basin, and the western region. The Torghut tribes in Hoboksar, Kulja, Zhair, and Jinghe were the northern, eastern, southern, and western groups of the Old Torghut tribe resettled by the Qing court in the above-mentioned locations, respectively. The areas included in Shixianshu were distributed in a vast area from Tangnu Uriankhai to Issyk-Kul Lake and from Ulaan-Uul to Talas. From the perspective of the calendar, it reflected the vast territory under the rule of the Qing Dynasty^[11].

The geographical expansion of Shixianshu in the Western Regions was essentially a cultural-coding process with scientific data as the medium. When the herders in Tarbagatai understood the celestial-phenomenon guidance

of “it is advisable to move the pasture southeastward during the Spring Equinox” through the Mongolian-language Shixianshu, and when the Beg’s yamen in Kashgar noted both the Islamic lunar month and the Chinese solar year in official documents, diverse ethnic groups formed a unique cultural-symbiotic form within the shared calendar framework. What the Qing court achieved through multilingual almanacs was precisely this cultural-integration wisdom of “unifying all phenomena with one calendar and integrating various customs through time sequences.”

3. The cultural dissemination significance of Shixianshu in the Western regions

The Shixianshu of the Qing Dynasty was not only the basis for time measurement but also an important part of social-cultural development, shaping the lifestyle and way of thinking of the Chinese people at multiple levels. The promulgation of Shixianshu promoted cultural exchanges between the Central Plains and the Western Regions. Shixianshu not only contained astronomical and calendrical information but also incorporated cultural elements and political concepts of the Central Plains. In this way, the residents of the Western Regions could better understand and accept Central Plains culture, enhancing their sense of cultural identity.

Thanks to the scientific theories of Western modern astronomy and the unremitting efforts of astronomical and calendrical observers and compilers in the Qing Dynasty, three latitude-longitude surveys were carried out across the country during the Kangxi and Qianlong reigns, obtaining important data such as detailed latitudes and longitudes with high precision. These data were finally included in the Shixianshu promulgated by the Qing Dynasty^[12]. From princes, ministers, and civil and military officials to ordinary people, they could all easily access the latest scientific and technological achievements of the Qing Dynasty. In addition, the latitude-longitude surveys conducted for the compilation of maps and Shixianshu, while serving the compilation of Shixianshu, also facilitated the lives of the Qing court and the people: “In addition to the daily tests in the Changchun Garden and the Astronomical Observatory, for the places with significant differences in local time, such as the seven provinces of Jiangnan, Zhejiang, Henan, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guangdong, people were dispatched to measure the altitude of the North Pole and the length of the sun’s shadow. Thus, there are solid evidences for the differences in longitude and latitude in the east-west and north-south directions and the radius of the sun’s orbit, and this was implemented”^[14]. The successful compilation and promulgation of the Shixianshu in the Qing Dynasty enabled important data related to the national economy and people’s livelihood, such as road mileage, to be based on scientific accuracy, ultimately ensuring the smooth progress of important military activities. “The urgent military report from Beijing to Urumqi (more than 8,500 li) was required to arrive within half a month”, which became an epitome of the efficient operation of the courier-road system in the Qing Dynasty^[13].

Before the implementation of Shixianshu, there were many excellent calendars in ancient China. However, the official calendars of previous dynasties failed to be supported by the core theories of modern Western astronomy and produce scientific results. Although the Shixianshu of the Qing Dynasty adopted the Tychonic system, which is now considered incorrect, it still had its rationality. Shixianshu, compiled based on the Chongzhen Lishu, became an important turning point in the history of the evolution of traditional Chinese calendars, promoting the transformation of traditional Chinese calendars from ancient to modern times and facilitating the integration of Chinese astronomy into the common development track of world astronomy^[14].

For ordinary people, Shixianshu was an important platform for understanding scientific knowledge. First, through Shixianshu, people could easily understand the differences in day-night lengths between the north and the south during the winter and summer solstices. According to Kaogu Xushuo (Continued Explanation of

Archaeology), “In summer, the day is shorter in the south than in the north, and in winter, the day is longer in the south than in the north. I learned this when I was over ten years old by reading Shixianshu. When I was young, I traveled and interacted with people from the south. Those who had been to the south among the northerners also talked about the local customs, but they never mentioned this. It seemed that they did not know. However, when I served as an official in southern Fujian, I verified it myself and found that the summer day was indeed shorter than that in the north, and the winter day was indeed longer, which was consistent with what was written in Shixianshu.” By reading Shixianshu, people at that time could understand the significant differences in day-night lengths between the north and the south in summer and winter. The calculation results of Shixianshu could withstand practical tests. Since Shixianshu was inexpensive and affordable for ordinary people, there was a national phenomenon of “every household has Shixianshu.” Second, as a widely popularized cultural carrier, Shixianshu greatly broadened the ways for people in various parts of Xinjiang to obtain climate and geographical knowledge: “According to what is recorded in Shixianshu, the times of the sun’s rising and setting and the solar-term changes are not very different from those in the capital. During the day, it is warm, and at night, it is cold. This is because it is close to the snow-capped mountains, and the climate at night is cold and gloomy throughout the four seasons, so people often get sick”^[15].

The physical form of Shixianshu itself was a microsite of cultural dissemination. The Manchu-Mongolian-Chinese trilingual Shixianshu issued to the Ili General in the 36th year of the Qianlong reign (1771) adopted the binding style of “yellow-silk cover and red-lined paper”, deliberately imitating the nomadic aesthetic of the Mongolian “birch-bark calendar scroll” in its shape. However, on the title page, there was a Manchu seal script, “Unifying the Four Seasons”, demonstrating the authority of the dynasty. This design strategy of “localizing the form and centralizing the core” enabled Shixianshu to be displayed beside the Buddha niche in the yurts of Mongolian Tajjis as a precious gift and to circulate in the rural bazaars of the Huibu region as a practical handbook. What is particularly important is the cross-cultural interpretation of terms such as “suitable for sacrifice” and “avoid earth-moving” in Shixianshu. The Uyghur people in Hami integrated them with the sowing taboos of their own Nawruz Festival, and the Torghut lamas interpreted “watching the full-moon eclipse” as an “auspicious time for worshipping Buddha.” This shows the active adaptation and creative transformation of the Central Plains calendrical culture in the Western Regions, which is the key mechanism for generating deep-level cultural identity in the process of cultural dissemination.

4. Conclusion

The dissemination of Shixianshu in the Western Regions during the Qing Dynasty was essentially a micro-practice of the expansion of Central Plains culture into the Western Regions, with the calendar as the carrier. As a special text integrating astronomical data and cultural symbols, Shixianshu implanted the tradition of “respectfully instructing the people about the time” from the Central Plains into Western Regions society by marking solar terms, farming times, taboos, and other contents. Farmers arranged their farming according to “Grain in Ear” and “White Dew” in the book, herders predicted cold waves by referring to “Counting the Nine-Day Periods after the Winter Solstice”, and merchants chose trading dates based on “suitable for travel.” In this way, the time cognition model of the Central Plains reconstructed the life rhythms of the people in the Western Regions. What is more noteworthy is that this cultural dissemination was not a one-way output. The publication of multilingual versions of Shixianshu not only preserved the nomadic time sequence memories in Manchu and Mongolian languages but

also conveyed the wisdom of farming civilization through the interpretation of solar terms carried by Chinese characters, forming a cultural-dialogue pattern of “one calendar with multiple voices.” From the Hami farmers hanging Shixianshu and “Kitchen God” calendar paintings side by side on the wall to the popularity of Manchu-Chinese bilingual almanacs in the Yarkand bazaar, it all confirmed the in-depth integration of calendrical culture in daily life. This silent cultural integration not only rooted the Central Plains cosmology of “the sun, moon, and stars are all under the imperial rule” in the Western Regions but also, through the shared time symbol system, constructed a foundation for cultural identity that transcended regions for diverse ethnic groups. The westward dissemination process of Shixianshu enlightens people that truly effective cultural integration often begins with the consensual construction of the basic order of life.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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