

## Study on the Objectivity of History

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**Keywords:** history; historical materials; interpretation; objectivity and subjectivity.

**Abstract:** This paper makes a reflective discussion on the objectivity of history from the perspective of the production of history knowledge. The author holds that the emphasis on the objectivity of history lies behind the nature of history as a discipline: the history of “science” or the history of “humanities”. Under the perspective of humanism, the objectivity of history only has a secondary status and weakened significance.

### 1. Introduction

What is history? History is a form of knowledge produced by historians through a series of processes such as collecting, collating, researching, narrating, annotating and writing historical documents. The formation of “history” requires following elements: basic historical materials, subjective historians and constructive production. In the category of modern academic classification, this process is covered by the subject of “history”. Therefore, in a sense, when discussing the objectivity of history, it refers to the objective attribute of the academic process of history production. The objectivity of history is not a general concept, but a complex and diverse process. The scholar Xue-dian Wang divides the objectivity of history into three different levels: the requirement for the objectivity of historical facts; the requirement for the objectivity of historical narration; the requirement for the objectivity of historical interpretation.<sup>[1]</sup> The objectivity requirements at each level are influenced by various complex factors. Therefore, this paper discusses the objectivity of history from the three aspects.

### 2. On the Objectivity of Historical Facts from Xikang Chorography

The objectivity of historical facts refers to the “authenticity” and “positivism” of historical documents. For historians, source materials are extremely important; they are the cornerstone of the building of “history”. Therefore, Si-nian Fu, a famous historian of the Republic of China, once put forward the famous saying that “modern history is only the study of historical materials”.<sup>[2]</sup> This claim is quite wise, though a little arbitrary. In the process of historical research, historians, as the subject of study, are “absent”, no matter how long the historical period apart from the current time, and no matter what the object of study. Therefore, information about the object of study can only be obtained from descriptions at that time or later. Therefore, the objectivity of written descriptions becomes another question to be discussed. When describing events happened at that time, the narrator was not only restrained by his own structure. His thought and action were also influenced by the background of the times, such as ideology, vision, state decrees and so on. Even if such external restrictions are excluded, the record and understanding of historical events still have limitations in objectivity. In other words, even at present, the witnesses of history cannot understand the overall situation of the whole events. Apart from some micro-things, historical events are always complex and cannot be fully grasped or understood by a single person through his observation from a meso-level. Witnesses cannot know all facts of the whole event. Furthermore, the limitation of the narrator leads him to pay attention to the specific aspects of an event, such as politics, economy, society, culture and ideology. The Xikang Chorography written by Nai-qiang Ren, a famous Tibetan scholar is taken as an example. Now Xikang Chorography is one of the basic documents for studying the history, ethnic groups and culture of the Kang-Tibet region.<sup>[3]</sup> Before he wrote the book, Ren had visited this area for a long time as a member of the Xikang government.

It is worth noting that at that time, he investigated the Tibetan-inhabited area as an official. His main purpose was to find out the necessity of establishing the Tibet Province. This political purpose presupposes the political bias of Xikang Chorography. In fact, the structure of Xikang Chorography also includes three parts of geography, territory and folklore. Secondly, in the specific era of the Republic of China, the nationalism thought was awakening, and then becoming mature and bursting. When facing the “barbaric” Tibetan people, Ren’s superiority as Han person was unconsciously revealed through his words. The traces can be found throughout the book. Therefore, through the authenticity of Xikang Chorography cannot be denied, its objectivity remains an issue to be discussed. Therefore, from the perspective of this case, historical facts as the basis of history are inevitably infiltrated with recorders’ own backgrounds, purposes and imagination.

### **3. Writing History: Narration and Interpretation**

The writing of history includes two parts: narration and interpretation. The objectivity of historical narration means that, on the basis of solid literature materials, historians need to organize materials with strict logic in order to reproduce the historical truth. As mentioned above, in order to present historical truth, objective, reliable and authentic documentary materials are the first step. After the careful examination, collation and absorption of materials, historians need to start “writing”. The process of organizing and writing is the process of choosing and selecting. Taking the modern history of China as an example, on the premise that scholars have reached a consensus on the time division of the modern history of China, historical facts occurring in this fixed time are complicated and can be considered from multiple levels and aspects. Among such complex historical activities, which events, figures and processes should be included in writing is a matter of different opinions. In the view of a historian with nationalist sentiment, the main line of modern Chinese history should be the process of the enlightenment, awakening, maturity and outbreak of modern nationalism. Around this main line, he will be more inclined to select events or figures that can reflect the nationalism spirit. If a historian who pays more attention to the development of modern China's economy needs to compile the modern Chinese history, he will pay more attention to economic statistics and historical events around the economy when screening historical documents. Thus, under different orientations of attention, the historical events of the same theme will present completely different aspects. The history presented is true, which is beyond doubt, but in objectivity, the narrator’s choices have tendencies.

In historical writing, besides what to write, there is the other problem of how to write. That is the issue of historical interpretation. The objectivity of history should be discussed from the perspective of historical interpretation, which means the objectivity of exploring the causes of historical development as well as the hidden meaning behind historical phenomena and facts. From different theoretical perspectives, the fundamental causes of historical development are different. Historical materialism attributes historical development to economic development, while Max Weber, a German thinker, attributes the root of historical development to culture (concepts). Therefore, in the search for the fundamental causes of historical development, the issue of historical objectivity is still a pluralistic one. In fact, among all the debates about the objectivity of history, the most heated one is the explanation of historical phenomena and the significance behind them. Though historians claim that their interpretation methods are scientific and rigorous, and that the “history” they demonstrate is totally objective, the objectivity of history interpretation is only a relative argument. Croce, a famous historian, once bemoaned in his book *Theory and Practice of History* that “all true history is contemporary history”, which is for some reason.<sup>[4]</sup> Because when we understand and interpret historical phenomena and their meanings, we only give historical facts “meaning” according to the needs of reality. In other words, scholars from different historical stages and backgrounds can provide different interpretations and understandings to the same historical event or process or person. Paul Kevin, an American scholar, took the story of Gou-jian, the king of Yue in the Spring and Autumn Period as the research text, and clearly pointed out that this historical text had different meanings in different historical stages in order to meet needs in reality.<sup>[5]</sup> Therefore, the objectivity of conclusions is worth discussing when we mining the significance behind historical

phenomena. So far, we have described the objectivity of history from different levels, and have a clearer understanding on the importance of historical objectivity and its relative degree at different levels.

#### **4. Behind the Objectivity of History: the History of “Science” or the History of “Humanities”?**

The debate on the objectivity of history for a long time can deepen our understanding on why and where the objectivity in history comes from. The concept of objectivity in history is introduced into concepts of the history subject under the influence of natural sciences in the overall background of the supremacy of scientism. Its purpose is to arouse the reflection of traditional history and endow history with more scientific attributes. Therefore, when discussing the objectivity of history, its essence refers to the relationship between history and science. In current academic circles, especially among historians deeply influenced by positivist science, they almost crazily believe in and pursue the objectivity of history, and try to exclude subjective elements in historical narration and interpretation. Extremists even question and criticize the scientific attributes of history with the subjective elements existing in historical research, and then deny that history can lead to “scientific” truth. They hold that even the “history” acquired through standardized academic research methods is unreliable and untrue. In other words, in the minds of such scholars, compared with other disciplines or knowledge forms which are more objective and scientific, historiography is a marginal discipline which is expelled from the core circle of the academic system; more importantly, historiography is regarded as a leisure reading for the public rather than a rigorous academic research.

In this regard, some scholars firmly refute that “the existence of ‘subjective elements’ in historical thinking is the key to the success of history studies.” Unlike natural sciences, history, as a humanities discipline, has irrevocable subjective components in its discipline character. Such a subjective component influences the characteristics and tendencies of historians in the collecting, reading, understanding, interpreting and writing of materials, and even leads the final “history” to different aspects and levels. Therefore, we cannot “castrate” or deny history by using the sharp “blade” of “objectivity” as the “authority” of science. Such an approach is unfair to history itself. In terms of the academic level or subject thinking, it is a rebellion of climbing trees to catch fish.

In fact, behind the disputes between the two sides about the “objectivity” and “subjectivity” of history is the controversy over the definition of the nature of the discipline of history. Different definitions of discipline attributes involve the methodological standpoint of the subject. Adopting the scientific standpoint of objectivism is obviously different from adopting the interpretation (construction) standpoint of humanism. They are incompatible viewpoints. Therefore, it can only be a difficult choice from the two options. The final result will lead to the definition, questioning and criticism of historical truth between the two parties. At present, the debate between “subjectivity” and “objectivity” in the discipline of history is only the beginning of a series of academic disputes, and it will not lead to a harmonious outcome of different paths.

In fact, history, like other humanities and social sciences opposed to natural sciences, inherently contains subjective elements, though some scholars claim their theories and methods are objective and scientific. Tracing its origin from the pedigree of disciplines, it can be found that the blood of these subjects is flowing with “subjective cells” since the day they gained independence by cutting off the “umbilical cord” of blood supply with a scientific “scalpel” from the “mother body” of philosophy. Therefore, the course of discipline development is the process of excluding subjective elements in academic research, so as to make the academic process and results more objective and scientific.

Nevertheless, the debate between the two sides has a common basis. Both of them acknowledge the existence of subjective elements in history; the difference between them lies in how to treat the subjectivity. The contemporary scholar Xue-tian Wang’s analysis is insightful. He clarifies the relationship between “subjectivity” and “objectivity” in history to a certain extent, and guides us to re-understand the nature and connotation of “objectivity” in history. Wang holds that, “‘objectivity’ in natural science is a rigid concept, while in history it is only an elastic concept with quantitative

attributes. The so-called ‘objectivity’ not only refers to history, but also emphasizes the restraint of ‘subjectivity’. It is not a commitment to the historical authenticity of the object, but a measure of historians’ academic conscience. Objectivity is only a matter of degree in the sense of historical practice. ‘Subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ are not two independent categories with clear boundaries, but only a matter of proportion and weight. Compared with that in natural science, objectivity in history is only possible in a weakened and secondary sense.”<sup>[1]</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, it is known that history always contains two elements: the subjective attribute and the objective attribute. The emphasis on the objectivity of history stems from the harsh demands on history under the background of scientism. However, from the perspective of humanism, we should take a more tolerant attitude to understand the subjective of history, rather than evaluate this subject according to academic norms for natural sciences.

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