

# On the Content and Value of the "Treatise on Customs" in the Imperially Commissioned Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing from the Forty-Ninth Year of the Qianlong Reign

Changyao Liu\*

Mudanjiang Normal University, Mudanjiang, 157000, China

\*Corresponding author: zj1220528@126.com

**Abstract:** *The treatise on customs constitutes a crucial component of local gazetteers. Through the Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing, the first officially compiled local gazetteer of the Northeast region during the Qing dynasty, one can gain insight into the evolution of Manchu customs before and after their entry into the Central Plains, as well as the changes in the customs of ethnic minorities in the Northeast. This gazetteer holds significant value in philology, folklore, and historiography for exploring the customs and history of ethnic minorities in the Northeast region.*

**Keywords:** *Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing; treatise on customs*

## Introduction

The origin of local gazetteers can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, when they were known as histories of various states and geographical books, representing the earliest identifiable form of local gazetteers. The establishment of a complete framework for local gazetteers took place during the Han dynasty, followed by rapid development in the Song and Yuan dynasties. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, the rulers placed exceptional emphasis on the compilation of gazetteers, sparking a surge in such activities at both central and local levels. This was particularly evident in the Qing dynasty, when the total number of local gazetteers reached its peak. Due to fluctuations in the central government's control over the Northeast region and changes in the region's own status, the compilation of gazetteers in the Northeast started relatively late and yielded fewer works compared to other regions. The "Liaoyang Illustrated Gazetteer," compiled during the Yuan dynasty, is currently the earliest known local gazetteer documenting the Northeast region, though it is now lost. In the early Qing dynasty, the Qing forces entered the Central Plains, leading to the relocation of the political center from Shengjing (present-day Shenyang) to Beijing. Despite this shift, the special status of Shengjing was not overlooked; it continued to be revered as the "Land of the Dragon's Ascent and the Important Auxiliary Capital." In the early Qing period, the court ordered the compilation of the "Comprehensive Gazetteer of the Great Qing" to document the history of the dynasty. Concurrently, work began on the "Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing." The compilation of the "Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing" commenced during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor, spanned the reigns of the Yongzheng and Qianlong Emperors, and resulted in five editions. The fifth edition was completed in the forty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign, making it a valuable resource for studying the politics, geography, and history of the Northeast region. The forty-ninth year Qianlong edition of the "Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing" encompasses content related to the three provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang, representing a comprehensive work for researching the history, geography, and ethnic culture of the Northeast region. This article will focus on examining the customs and culture of the Northeast region, particularly content related to ethnic minorities and its academic value.

"The Imperially Commissioned Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing" was completed in the forty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign, comprising a total of one hundred and thirty volumes. Seven senior court officials, including A Gui and Yu Minzhong, served as chief editors of the compilation bureau, while Liu Jinzhi, Supervisor of the Office of Scrutiny for Rites with Seal-holding Authority, and Cheng Weiyue, Vice Director of the Bureau of Evaluations in the Ministry of Personnel, acted as chief compilers. The team consisted of a total of twenty-eight individuals, including chief editors,

compilers, and proofreaders. The treatise on customs is located in Volume 105 and is further subdivided into six sections: the jurisdictions of Fengtian Prefecture, the jurisdictions of Jinzhou Prefecture, the jurisdictions of Jilin, the jurisdictions of Heilongjiang, a general account of customs, and a supplementary account of customs. Additionally, records of customs are also found in the miscellaneous records section of Volume 108.

## 1. Characteristics of Content

### *1.1 Precious Archival Material on Customs in the Northeast Region*

Although China has a millennium-long tradition of compiling local gazetteers, such work in the Northeast region began relatively late and produced a comparatively smaller number of works. The Qing dynasty marked the peak period for the compilation of Chinese local gazetteers. As Shengjing was the dynasty's sacred place of origin, the imperial court paid extraordinary attention to the compilation of its local gazetteer. Consequently, the compilation of the "Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing" was initially overseen by local officials before being taken over by central government officials, with the addition of the designation "Imperially Commissioned." This action fully demonstrates the court's high regard for this undertaking. The formation of this gazetteer was not achieved overnight; its compilation and revision spanned over a century, extending across the reigns of three Qing emperors from Yongzheng to Qianlong. It expanded from an initial thirty-three volumes to the final one hundred and thirty volumes of the "Imperially Commissioned Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing" completed in the forty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign. This continuous process of expansion clearly reflects the deepening of the Qing court's understanding of the Northeast region and the systematization of its documentation, establishing the work as one of the most authoritative sources for researching the history, geography, politics, and culture of the Northeast during the Qing dynasty.

The term "Northeast" can be traced back to as early as the Western Han dynasty. As recorded in the "Rites of Zhou: Official in Charge of Territories," "The northeast is called Youzhou, and its sacred mountain is Mount Yiwulü." This indicates that "Youzhou" was the early designation for the Northeast region. During the Liao and Jin dynasties, the central government established official posts in the Northeast region, such as the Regional Military Command of the Northeast Circuit and the Pacification Commission of the Northeast Circuit, incorporating the area into the national administrative territory. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, the political status of the Northeast region, particularly the Shengjing area, gradually rose.

The territorial expanse of the Northeast region reached its peak during the Qing dynasty. "To the east, it extended over 280 li to the border of Xingjing, marking the boundary with Jilin; to the west, over 800 li to Shanhaiguan, marking the boundary with Linyu in Zhili; to the south, over 730 li to the territory of Ninghai, reaching the maritime boundary; to the north, over 260 li to the border of Kaiyuan; to the southeast, over 540 li to Zhenjiang, marking the boundary with Korea; to the southwest, over 800 li to the sea; to the northeast, over 230 li to Weiyuanbao, marking the boundary with Jilin; and to the northwest, over 450 li to the Jiuguantai frontier gate, marking the boundary with Mongolia."<sup>[1]</sup> This delineates the territorial scope of the Northeast region at that time, stretching from the Greater Khingan Range in the north to the Liaodong Peninsula in the south, and from the East Sea in the east to the Mongolian grasslands in the west. Given the vastness of the Northeast region, it encompasses diverse topographies and landforms, including majestic mountain ranges and boundless grasslands. Simultaneously, it features vast seas and vital transportation routes connecting to other countries. Therefore, the content contained within the "Imperially Commissioned Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing" constitutes valuable historical materials for the Northeast region.

The gazetteer covers the three northeastern provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning. The specific areas included are as follows: the jurisdictions of Fengtian Prefecture consist of Xingjing, Chengde County, Liaoyang Department, Haicheng County, Gaiping County, Kaiyuan County, Tieling County, Fuzhou, Ninghai County, Xiuyan Fort, and Fenghuang Fort; the jurisdictions of Jinzhou Prefecture consist of Jin County, Ningyuan Department, and Guangning County; the jurisdictions of Jilin consist of Jilin, Ningguta, Boduna, Sanxing, Alchuka, and Hunchun; and the jurisdictions of Heilongjiang consist of Qiqihar, Mergen, Heilongjiang, and Hulun Buir. This section follows a uniform format: it first introduces the local people's character traits, then describes their modes of production and livelihood (farming, hunting, fishing). For example:

Xingjing

The people are robust and plain, not given to elaborate adornment, and are particularly skilled in archery and hunting.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### Ninghai County

They excel in the benefits of fishing and salt production, and their customs emphasize diligence in farming and weaving.<sup>[3]</sup>

#### Xiuyan Fort

The banner people and commoners are simple and honest. Men engage in plowing and farming, while women diligently spin and weave. Literary culture is gradually flourishing, and more uncultivated land is being opened up.<sup>[4]</sup>

This section fully illustrates the influence of the Northeast region's geographical environment on local customs. The description of Ninghai County, which "excels in fishing and salt production and emphasizes diligence in farming and weaving," indicates its coastal location, where the inhabitants rely on fishing for their livelihood. The account of Fenghuang Fort, stating that it "is situated near the eastern frontier, where the people are simple and honest, engage in commerce and trade, and the markets and neighborhoods are prosperous," reflects that Fenghuang Fort served as a border city at the time, sustaining itself through trade with neighboring countries. Located at a high latitude, the Northeast region experiences long, cold winters. In ancient times, the people of Fuyu would wear "robes made from foxes, long-tailed monkeys, white and black sable" during winter. This not only indicates the presence of these animals in the Northeast region at that time but also underscores the area's cold climate. In summary, a region's customs and habits are inextricably linked to its geographical location and climatic environment. The treatise on customs in the Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing accurately captures the survival wisdom of the people in the Northeast region—living off the mountains if by the mountains, and living off the sea if by the sea—while also embodying distinctive regional cultural imprints.

### ***1.2 Emphasis on the Legitimacy of Imperial Authority***

As a dynasty governed by an ethnic minority, the Qing consistently faced challenges regarding the "distinction between Hua and Yi." Jizi, a sage recorded in the Book of Changes and the Records of the Grand Historian, taught the people "to abide by the eight prohibitions concerning propriety, righteousness, farming, sericulture, and weaving, resulting in the people not stealing from one another, no need to lock doors, and women and children being chaste and trustworthy." This transformed local customs, making them "honest in character, vigorous in spirit, practiced in courtesy and deference, and earnest in the study of poetry and classics," where "people were mostly magnanimous, upheld moral integrity, and carried on the legacy of the Motai clan." He is widely recognized as a sage. In the "General Account of Customs" section of the Comprehensive Gazetteer, the historical figure of "Jizi" is specifically highlighted. This deliberate emphasis seeks to downplay the Qing dynasty's identity as a frontier ethnic minority, thereby accentuating the shared historical origins between the Manchu and the Central Plains ethnic groups. This approach further reinforces the legitimacy of Qing rule, constructing a historical chain of "Liaodong—the ancient teachings of sages—the Qing inheriting this legacy."

The treatise on customs not only employs the words and deeds of ancient sages to document the legitimacy of imperial authority but also utilizes comparative methods to highlight the significant achievements in educating and civilizing the Northeast region after the Qing's entry into the Central Plains. Before the Qing's entry, the people were only familiar with "horseback riding and archery." After the Qing's entry, the court established new policies and instilled new educational and civilizing ideas among the populace, gradually leading them to acquire knowledge and understand rites and decorum. In several instances within the treatise on customs, comparisons are made between "old customs" and "present customs" to emphasize the legitimacy of Qing rule and its accomplishments in education and civilization. This approach not only serves to preserve the historical traditions of the Northeast region but also, on a deeper level, aims to shape the Qing dynasty's image as one that "originated in the East and civilized the people." It highlights the dynasty's achievements in "nurturing and benefiting the populace," thereby providing historical and moral support for the legitimacy and justification of its rule.

#### Chengde County

Old customs: The people were honest and simple in nature, vigorous and resolute in spirit, practiced

rites and music, and esteemed poetry and classics. Present customs: Scholars cultivate purity and goodness, and folkways are characterized by simplicity and refinement. Those near the capital, in particular, exhibit the prosperity of refined culture and ceremonial attire.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### Liaoyang Department

Old customs: The people were brave, skilled in horseback riding and archery, honest and simple, and diligent in farming. Present customs: Farmers understand the importance of focusing on fundamental pursuits, and scholars revere the study of the classics.<sup>[6]</sup>

#### Haicheng County

Old customs: The people were strong-willed and fond of hunting, with more substance than refinement. Present customs: They are cautious in conduct, lead by example in education, abide by the law, and uphold public duty.<sup>[7]</sup>

### ***1.3 The Unique Equestrian and Archery Customs of the Manchu***

The Qing dynasty was established by an ethnic minority from the Northeast region—the Manchu. Even before entering the Central Plains, the Manchu already possessed a tradition of equestrianism and archery. This custom not only served as a distinctive ethnic marker but also constituted the military prowess that enabled their dominance. The equestrian and archery traditions of the Manchu have a long history, traceable to the Sushen people of ancient times. According to the *Bamboo Annals: Annals of the Five Emperors*, "In the twenty-fifth year (of Emperor Shun of the Youyu clan), the Xishen people came to pay tribute and offered bows and arrows." "Xishen" refers to the Sushen, and their presentation of bows and arrows as tribute demonstrates that the ancestors of the Northeast region had long used these weapons for social interaction and daily life. After thousands of years of inheritance, during the Ming dynasty, the various Jurchen tribes, descendants of the Sushen, still maintained a lifestyle of hunting in forests and mountains. At that time, "equestrianism and archery" were primarily used for production activities and inter-tribal warfare. During the reign of Qing Taizu Nurhaci, the various Jurchen tribes gradually achieved unification. Concurrently, "equestrianism and archery" became an integral component of the unified military force. By the time of Qing Taizong Hong Taiji, this was further elevated as "equestrianism and archery" was established as the "foundation of Manchuria," solidifying it as a fundamental institution of the state. After entering the Central Plains, while implementing sinicization policies to consolidate their rule, the Qing rulers consistently and deliberately preserved and emphasized this traditional ethnic custom. Therefore, "equestrianism and archery" long remained a core training subject for the Eight Banners army and a rigid standard for military assessments, thereby sustaining the Manchu martial ethos. In the officially compiled *Imperial Commissioned Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing: Treatise on Customs*, the term "equestrianism and archery" is repeatedly mentioned as many as eleven times. This not only serves as an official endorsement of its status as a proud Manchu custom but also profoundly reveals the Qing rulers' attempt to enhance ethnic cohesion by reinforcing traditional practices and prevent the Manchu from being completely assimilated amidst the surrounding Han culture.

#### Jilin

The people excel in equestrianism and archery, value honesty and integrity, and are refined in their appreciation of poetry and classics, combining substance with refinement.<sup>[8]</sup>

#### Boduna

The people prize simplicity and sincerity, excel collectively in equestrianism and archery, and their customs are straightforward and unadorned.<sup>[9]</sup>

#### Hunchun

Frugality and simplicity are mutually esteemed, and the people are skilled in hunting.<sup>[10]</sup>

## **2. Research Value**

### ***2.1 Philological Value***

The *Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing* is the first officially compiled comprehensive gazetteer from the Qing dynasty encompassing the entire Northeast region. It preserves a vast amount of

documentation on folk customs and traditions of the Northeast, such as social ethos, local customs, and ethnic minority practices, making it an important reference for studying the history of ethnic minorities in the area. Preceding official histories, historical records, various local gazetteers, and notebooks from ancient texts serve as significant source materials for the "Treatise on Customs" within the Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing. These include the "Treatise on Geography in the Book of Han"; the "History of Jin"; the "Treatise on Geography in the History of Yuan"; the "Comprehensive Gazetteer of the Yuan"; the "Gazetteer of Fengtian Prefecture"; the "Gazetteer of Jinzhou Prefecture"; the "Comprehensive Account of Heilongjiang Customs"; the "Book of the Later Han"; the "Records of the Three Kingdoms"; the "Book of Jin"; the "History of the Northern Dynasties"; the "Later Tang History"; the "Comprehensive Examination of Documents"; the "History of the Khitan State"; and the "Recorded Accounts of Songmo," among others.

"The Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing" was compiled under imperial decree, initially by local officials and later continued by central government officials. It went through the hands of dozens of appointed court officials before its completion. The forty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign edition of the "Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing" was compiled by twenty-eight officials, divided into Manchu and Han teams for compilation and proofreading, underscoring the authenticity and accuracy of its content. The "Imperially Commissioned Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing" not only emphasizes the scrutiny of historical documents but also incorporates contemporary field observations and accounts. The work meticulously records the customs and practices of ethnic minorities in the Northeast region, as well as the historical evolution of these groups. This interwoven narrative approach not only outlines a complete picture of the folkways and customs of the Northeast region but also constructs a dynamic and coherent regional cultural landscape. It provides a solid textual foundation for future research on the ethnic history, folklore, and sociocultural transformations of the Northeast.

## ***2.2 Value in Folklore***

Folklore refers to the integrated cultural whole that is formed and recognized by a specific community through their productive activities and life practices within social existence. It emerges under the influence of certain geographical, political, economic, cultural, and psychological factors, characterized by relative stability, collectivity, and implicit transmission. It is not merely a simple accumulation of unrelated individual behaviors or practices but encompasses multiple aspects within a relatively stable society, including forms of material life, social organization, annual festivals and rituals, spiritual beliefs, and oral folk literature. The stability of these morphological structures and their intergenerational transmission constitute the essential features of folklore. Firstly, the stability of folklore ensures the continuity of an ethnic group's cultural memory throughout its developmental history. Secondly, the transmissibility of folklore operates as a non-institutional, non-normative educational process. Through means such as oral transmission, behavioral imitation, and ritual practices within the group, it imparts the community's folklore to new generations. This process endows the ethnic group with distinctive markers and fosters a sense of collective identity, centripetal force, and cohesion.

"According to the historical records of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, it is recorded that salt would congeal on tree bark, and there were also salt ponds."<sup>[11]</sup>

"According to the historical records of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, it is recorded that salt would congeal on tree bark, and there were also salt ponds." Based on historical records from the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, this region had two forms of salt production: one where salt would congeal on the surface of tree bark, and the other being the existence of natural salt ponds.

"During the Jin dynasty, the areas east of Shuaibin consumed sea salt, while regions such as Huining and Hu'erha relied on salt from Zhaozhou." By the Jin dynasty, salt consumption in this area had a clear geographical division: people east of Shuaibin (near present-day Ussuriysk in Russia) consumed sea salt, while those in regions such as Huining (present-day Acheng, Heilongjiang) and Hu'erha (present-day Mudanjiang River basin) consumed salt produced in Zhaozhou (present-day Zhaoyuan, Heilongjiang).

"This indicates that the lands of the Sushen were never without salt." From this, it can be concluded that the region inhabited by the Sushen people (an ancient ethnic minority settlement in the Northeast) was never lacking in salt.

"As for the salt said to congeal on trees, it likely still required boiling and refining to become

usable." However, it is speculated that the "salt congealed on tree bark" mentioned in historical records may not have been naturally edible in its raw state; it likely required processes such as boiling and refining to become usable salt.

### 2.3 Historical Value

The compilation of the "Treatise on Customs" in the Imperially Commissioned Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing was not created out of thin air but was based on extensive collection and rigorous verification of earlier documents. The compilers systematically traced materials from official histories such as the Book of the Later Han and the Records of the Three Kingdoms, specialized historical works and notes like the History of the Khitan State and the Recorded Accounts of Songmo, as well as local gazetteers such as the Comprehensive Gazetteer of the Yuan and the Gazetteer of Fengtian Prefecture. They comprehensively and systematically organized information on the folkways and customs of the Northeast region from various texts, providing later researchers with a "long compilation of historical materials" on the ethnic customs of the Northeast that spans ancient to modern times, significantly reducing the difficulty of document collection for related research.

### 3. Conclusion

In summary, as a gazetteer compiled by court officials, the content selection of the forty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign edition of the "Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing" profoundly reflects the political intentions and contemporary ideology of the Qing rulers. Among these, the most evident is the recording of the equestrian and archery traditions of the Manchu. However, these records extend beyond mere descriptions of local customs and practices, with the ultimate goal of strengthening ethnic identity. The gazetteer clearly indicates that when the Manchu, as an ethnic minority, held political power, it was necessary not only to assimilate Han traditions but also to preserve their own cultural customs. Therefore, the "Treatise on Customs" in the Imperially Commissioned Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing also serves as a crucial lens through which to gain insight into the ethnic policies, state governance strategies, and internal cultural tensions of the Qing dynasty.

The "Treatise on Customs" within the Imperially Commissioned Comprehensive Gazetteer of Shengjing does not merely record ethnic history and traditional practices. By tracing historical developments and making comparisons across different regions within the same timeframe, the gazetteer documents the dynamic trajectory of the intermingling and evolution of customs among ethnic minorities in the Northeast region. This focus on the "transformation" of customs elevates the work beyond a simple record of local conditions, establishing it as a valuable resource for studying the cultural geography, history of ethnic relations, and social changes in the Northeast. It presents a multi-dimensional, living picture of regional culture, revealing the complex and rich cultural stratigraphy of the "sacred place of origin" across the long course of history.

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