Last Chapter Unfinished: 
The Making of the Official Qing History and the Crisis of Traditional Chinese Historiography

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Abstract:

The making of the official Qingshi (Qing History) during the turbulent years of early Republican China epitomizes the flux and complexities of modern Chinese historiography in an age of transition. It had long been routine practice in China for a newly-established regime, in assuming the mantle of legitimate rule, to authorize an official history of the previous, overthrown dynasty. With twenty-four “orthodox histories” as preceding models and a more or less standardized layout, composing the twenty-fifth one should have been a feasible task. However, the making of the history of the last dynasty was besieged with unprecedented changes and challenges: universal kingship and the mandate of Heaven had collapsed, the continuity of cultural tradition was put into doubt, and, most important of all, the past was no longer fixable
in a static picture for the present to capture. In short, along with the fall of the last dynasty, the genre of “orthodox history” itself became history. The making of the Qingshi not only provided the final chapter of Chinese dynastic - orthodox - history but arguably the last chapter of traditional official historiography as well.

This paper delves into the making of the Qing History by the Bureau of Qing Historiography established in 1914, its rushed publication in 1928 under the title Qingshi gao (Draft Qing History), and its banning by the Nationalist government in 1930. Special attention is paid to how the leading compilers, many of whom deemed themselves Qing royalists, attempted to preserve or recapitulate a collective memory of Qing China and thus how their narrative was intertwined with their concern for political and cultural identity. As the Qing court had long established the Bureau of State Historiography and precompiled its own dynastic history, the compilers of the Qingshi gao were overwhelmed by the weighty legacies left by their Qing counterparts and were able neither to digest all the archives thoroughly nor to reexamine their preprogrammed memories from different perspectives. The Republican memory of the Qing, as exemplified by the final version of the Qingshi gao, was conditioned by the imperial memories already established by the Qing.

The making of the last dynastic history remains an unfinished enterprise. One issue is certain: the Qingshi gao published in 1928 will never be officially authorized as one of the “orthodox histories,” if only because there is no longer any agency capable of this act. On the other hand, it is also irreplaceable, for its narratives, its arrangement of themes, and its choice of personalities represent to a certain extent a collective effort by a specific group of intellectuals in the dynasty-republic transition period. The Qingshi gao serves as an ideal lens through which we can examine the perspective of these compilers. Not only will the Qingshi gao live forever, but also Qing history as such will forever remain in draft. Perhaps efforts to compile an “ideal” complete Qing History will never cease, but they are unlikely to be enshrined as the conclusive interpretation of Qing History. Indeed, the earlier Twenty-four Histories also have become incomplete drafts open to further revision.

Form the perspective of modern historiography, all of the previous Twenty-five orthodox histories should be redefined as the Twenty-five history Drafts, tentative accounts aiding but not defining our understanding of the