



Autobiography of a Chinese City:
The History of Harbin in the Mirror of the Official City Gazetteer

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Abstract:

In 1980 China embarked on a huge project of compiling thousands of volumes of “New Gazetteers” – thus reviving a unique Chinese tradition from imperial times for writing local history in the particular gazetteer mold – covering all of China’s modern and contemporary history as it has unfolded at the levels of provinces, cities and counties. In the decades that have followed, more than 100,000 individuals have been involved in this great undertaking, which has now become a well-established branch of government work at all levels. This article examines the evolution of gazetteer work in the North-eastern city of Harbin as well as its products. In Harbin, the gazetteer project has seen many twists and turns: there have been periods of enthusiastic advance as well as recurring crises, and the direction of work has seen dramatic reversals. The rocky course of gazetteer work in Harbin is partly a

reflection of the difficulties of adapting the traditional gazetteer format to contemporary needs.

The article deals not with the high intellectual politics of contemporary Chinese historical writing but with the humble world of local historians working within a city administration's bureaucratic structures. It is a study of the interaction of politics, bureaucracy, and historical work at the local level, and it points to a continued and unchallenged command of the Party-State in this field. Local historical work in China remains subject to bureaucratic control and political scrutiny, far more so than is the case in the activities of the historical profession at the national level. But the momentous changes of Chinese society in the past two decades have eroded the purposefulness of control and scrutiny, and those Harbin historians working within the gazetteer enterprise face mounting pressures to find new directions. The study offers a window to the efforts – and the problems – of the contemporary Party-State in China, at the level of a large city, in the field of ‘cultural construction’ (*wenhua jianshe* 文化建设).

关键字：

地方志，史学，回忆，党的领导。

摘要：

中国在1980年开始进行一个大规模新编地方志的计画 - 这个计画使得帝国时期将地方历史编成地方志的模式得以复兴 - 包含了所有展现在省、市和县层次的中国近现代史。一二十年来已有十万人投入这个庞大计画，以致这个计画已确实地变成各级政府工作中的一个部门。这篇文章要检查的是地方志在东北都市哈尔滨的发展和其成果。在哈尔滨，地方志计画遇到很多转折：有热烈的进展期，也有危机反复发生的时期，而工作的方向也发生很激烈的逆转。在哈尔滨地方志工作方向之所以摇摆不定，部分是对为了符合现在的需要，在采用传统地方志模式时所遇到的困难的一种反应。

本文要处理的不是高级知识份子对如何写中国当代史的策略，而是在一个都市的行政官僚政治架构内工作的地位低微的地方史家之世界。这是一个对地方阶层的政治、官僚和历史工作之间的互动的研究，它显示党国在这个领域里拥有持续而不可挑战的支配权。在中国，地方的历史工作仍停留在受官僚控制和政治检查的阶段，而比国家级的历史工作者还更甚。但是发生在过去二十年的重大社会变迁腐蚀了控制和检查的目的，以致那些在哈尔滨地方志部门中工作的史家在寻找新的方向时面临很大的压力。这个研究提供了我们一个从地方层级的文化建设领域来观视党国在当代中国的成果和问题之窗户。

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Introduction

This article examines some aspects of local history writing in contemporary China. The case chosen is the North-eastern city of Harbin, an extraordinary case in the modern Chinese urban landscape with its history of being founded by Russian railway officials in the late 19th century as well as victim to no less than 14 years of Japanese occupation from 1932 to 1945. The focus is on the contemporary Harbin “City Gazetteer” (*Shizhi* 市志) project, which is the juggernaut of local historiographical work in Harbin, as well as in China generally; on a national level, China recently completed publication of more than 6,000 volumes of county, city and provincial gazetteers having involved the efforts of more than 100,000 people within the period from 1982 to 2000. Studying gazetteer work in Harbin provides a window to the operations of the Party-State in the field of ‘cultural construction’; clearly, the Party-State commands considerable resources at the local level in its efforts to shape historical writing, and it is fully able to dictate rules and structures. But the study will also demonstrate some of the blind spots and fault lines of this undertaking. After a brief introduction to the gazetteer genre and to the context of local historical writing in China’s north-east, the article proceeds to examine the production process of the Harbin City Gazetteer, as well as to review and discuss the actual products that have come out of this mammoth project.

Gazetteers

The contemporary New Gazetteers of the 1980s and 1990s spring from an ancient source: the tradition in China of compiling “gazetteers” (*fangzhi* 方志 – which can be briefly defined as ‘local historical encyclopedia’) is a millennium old, and the surviving 8,000 local gazetteers, in 125,000 *juan* 卷, constitute only a fraction of what was actually produced in this genre.¹ The traditional gazetteer offered an inventory of the locality in terms of natural

¹ For the traditional gazetteers, see Leslie 1973: 71-74, Wilkinson 2000: 154-162, and Lin Yanjing 1988.

conditions, history, institutions, buildings, prominent individuals, etc., providing a manual as well as a model for officialdom and gentry; today it remains one of the most important sources for social-scientific research related to Chinese history².

After the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 the gazetteer tradition has been resumed as well as reshaped under the heading "New Gazetteers" (*xin difangzhi* 新地方志 or just *xinzhi* 新志). To the newly established Confucian-Leninist state of the 1950s, the bureaucratically organized and supervised gazetteer genre must have appeared as an appealing way to graft new realities on to a well established tradition, matching socialism with Chinese culture. A revival of the gazetteer genre was first considered during the 1950s but the effort was discontinued in the early 1960s. Such was also the case in Harbin, where early attempts to initiate gazetteer compilation in Harbin were sidetracked by the propagandism of local historical writing in the 1960s and 1970s, which allowed only for anti-imperialistic outbursts coupled with a few attempts at writing the working class history of Harbin.³

The second revival of *xinzhi* came in 1980-1982. Party Elder Hu Qiaomu launched the post-Mao era drive to compile *xinzhi* in an important speech at the April 1980 congress of the Chinese Historical Studies Association. A national journal for local history and *difangzhi* was inaugurated in 1981, along with the establishment of a learned society, "The Chinese Association for Local History and Gazetteers".⁴ Similar structures emerged at provincial, city and county levels across China, and *xinzhi* editorial committees, typically with a majority of non-academic bureaucrats representing different sectors, were established to provide "political leadership". In the case of Harbin, an editorial committee dominated by city cadres was in place by 1981, and actual work started in 1982.⁵ National standards for gazetteer work were established in a set of Temporary Provisions for the Compilation of New

² A recent example of excellent historiographical research based on local gazetteers is Marks 1998.

³ Thøgersen and Clausen 1992: 163

⁴ The journal, initially called "Chinese Local History and Gazetteers Newsletter" (Zhongguo difang shizhi tongxun 中国地方史志通讯), changed name several times, to finally become called "Chinese Local Gazetteers" (Zhongguo difangzhi 中国地方志) in 1986.

⁵ Clausen and Thøgersen 1995: 202-04.

Difangzhi issued by the Guiding Group in 1985. The new *difangzhi* should cover the period up to 1985; they were to be compiled at the administrative levels of province/municipality, large city (provincial and district capital), and county, leaving open the option of having city districts (*diqu* 地区) publishing their own gazetteers, as well as singling out ‘famous mountains and large rivers’ for separate treatment.⁶ These provisions were confirmed at the First National *Difangzhi* Work Conference held in 1986. At this conference, further, the goal of completing the New Gazetteers by the year 2000 was established. Since then, gazetteers have also appeared in many places at the sub county level; but it has remained an official policy to endorse only gazetteers at the three core administrative levels stipulated above. As late as in 1996 Premier Li Peng reiterated, in a speech addressed to the Second National *Difangzhi* Work Conference, that “we must concentrate our strength on doing a good job of editing gazetteers at the three levels, and the scope should not be arbitrarily expanded ...”.⁷

By the time of the Second Work Conference in 1996 about 3,400 of the projected 6,000 volumes had already been published or were commissioned to print; the total number of gazetteer officials had reached 22,000.⁸ The final goal appeared in sight, but an extra effort was required during the last few years of the 1990s in order to reach the target. The 1996 Conference further published the decision to maintain at least some of the gazetteer compilation apparatus in operation after the completion of the New Gazetteers in 2000 in order to produce *xuzhi* 续志 (“follow-up gazetteers”) covering the period from 1986 to 2000.⁹

Local history writing in Harbin and the New Gazetteer Project

North-eastern China is often and stereotypically characterized as “lacking history and civilization”. This problematique is captured in a story about

⁶ Lai Xinxia ed. 1988: 5-7.

⁷ Li Peng 1996: 2-3.

⁸ Yu Wen 1996: 7.

⁹ Yu Wen 1996: 11.

Zhou Enlai as remembered by Guan Shanfu, a veteran cadre in the field of propaganda work in the North-east:

Around the winter of 1959, comrade Zhou Enlai came to Harbin and spoke at a large cadres' meeting, where he said roughly the following: The North-east is culturally backward, lacks a flourishing literature, and has few people of talent. He went on to explain that when he said backward, he was not thinking of the fields of applied science and technology, where the North-east was not backward at all. He was instead thinking of the fields of 'cultural history' (*wenshi xueke* 文史学科), where the historical conditions of the region had created backwardness. He also said: "As soon as there is time, engage in cultural studies. Maybe you cannot afford it now, but then you must make up for this deficiency later."¹⁰

It was this old stigma of cultural backwardness that was to be remedied by the compilation of *xinzhì* as one of the most important features of 'cultural construction' to be undertaken by the various administrative units in North-eastern China. The 'Chineseness' of China's contested and 'backward' North-east was to be reinforced by embracing a project so intimately associated with core traditions of Chinese society.

The central paradox of contemporary gazetteer work in China is that, being in charge of a highly official historical account, the editors are sorely tempted to avoid 'sensitive issues' in order to stay clear of committing 'political mistakes'; but at the same time the very format of the gazetteer, with its ambition of all-inclusiveness, forces the same editors to cross the entire minefield of modern history without skipping any period or major issue. In the case of Harbin the challenges have been particularly daunting. The essential problem is how to establish the *Chinese* history of a city born from and shaped by Russian and Japanese designs. This is the pivot among the many thorny issues that local historians have to face in Harbin: how to integrate the prehistory (or "early history", as the Harbin local historians claim) of the Harbin region, which was in fact a breeding ground for 'barbarian' tribes and conquest regimes, into the larger history of Han civilization; how

¹⁰ Tong Dong ed. 1987: 1. I want to thank my colleague Stig Thøgersen for sharing this source with me.

to analyze ‘economic imperialism’ considering the evident contributions of foreign inputs to the city’s development; how to distinguish between (evil) Russian chauvinism and (good, revolutionary) Soviet policies; how to portray the role of the Communists in Harbin during the long years of the Japanese occupation, when the local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) branch committed a number of serious ‘mistakes’ according to present Party history guidelines.¹¹ Post-1949 history obviously presents new challenges related to the ‘mistakes’ of the Maoist era. These and other issues have been hotly debated at many meetings and in the pages of the quarterly journal *Ha’erbin Shizhi* 哈尔滨史志, “Harbin History and Gazetteer”, published by the Harbin City Gazetteer Editorial Office, with the debates of the 1980s being relatively more lively. Ideological debates have become less prominent in the 1990s, but old ambivalences were rekindled by the issue of the city’s Hundred Years’ Anniversary in 1998: to celebrate or not to celebrate? Was the arrival of the Russian-built Chinese Eastern Railway to the Harbin area in 1898 in fact the legitimate ‘birthday’ of Harbin? A commemorative conference was planned at Heilongjiang University in Harbin, but the PRC government eventually decided against giving the go-ahead permission to the conference.¹²

Since the early 1980s, local history writing has been the responsibility of a whole range of institutions, the most significant among which are:

– *Wenshi ziliao* 文史资料 (“Historical Text Materials”), a publication program conducted under the auspices of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Like the gazetteers, Historical Text Materials are systematically published at different administrative levels, with material related to Harbin’s history being published at both the national level, at the level of Heilongjiang province, and at the level of the city itself. As for the publication program at the city level, formal responsibility rests with a Committee for Research into Historical Text Materials, which is an adjunct to the Political Consultative Conference of Harbin, while day-to-day work is carried out by a small office of editors which publishes one or two annual volumes of the Historical Text Materials publication. Some

¹¹ Clausen and Thøgersen 1995: xii.

¹² Lahusen 1998.

are rather loosely edited compilations of biographies and autobiographical texts while other volumes are organized around a common theme, such as a publication of recollections related to the communist takeover of the city in April 1946. The informants are mainly selected from among ‘personalities’ (*renwu* 人物) rather than from ordinary people; some are veteran Party cadres, but many are former industrialists, professors and other such social elites.¹³

– The Academy of Social Sciences is present in Harbin with both a Heilongjiang Provincial CASS and a Harbin Institute of Social Sciences; both institutions have sections for local historical research.

– The Party History Committee is in charge of the Harbin Party History Gazetteer. Research into Party history started at the Harbin Institute of Social Sciences but was transferred to a separate unit in 1985.

– Another unit with activities related to Harbin’s history is the Archive (*Dang’anguan* 档案馆), which also publishes collections of historical documents. Local historical research further takes place at one of the city’s universities, as well as at various museums and libraries, most important among them being the Exhibition Hall for Evidence of the Crimes of the 731st Unit of the Japanese Invasion Army in China (*Qinhua Rijun di qisanyao budui zuizheng chenlieguan* 侵华日军第七三一部队罪证陈列馆), which has played an important role in keeping alive the memory of the Japanese war crimes in the Harbin area.

The production of the Harbin City Gazetteer

Harbin Shizhi 哈尔滨市志 is a giant in the landscape of the local history enterprise in Harbin. Since 1982, the project has trained and employed – full time or part time – more than 3,000 individuals; it has collected written sources with a total number of characters of more than 500 million; it has produced 71 gazetteers – general volumes, volumes specialized by trade as well as gazetteers covering the sub-city administrative levels of district and

¹³ Clausen and Thøgersen 1995: 208ff.

county – published in 36 large volumes, as well as a number of other publications such as reference works and yearbooks.¹⁴

The evolution of this enormous project has not been a smooth and straight line. During the early 1980s gazetteer work in Harbin appears to have resembled a mass movement in some respects, with all important units establishing writing groups that sought to draw on grass roots enthusiasm for local history. Thousands of interviews were conducted and all kinds of textual material were collected. In particular, the efforts of elderly or retired cadres – needing only symbolic remuneration – was called for to support and staff the project. But with the focus of the economic reforms moving to the cities in 1984, the bureaucratic infrastructure of the *xinzhi* project was shaken, and a mid-1980s crisis of *xinzhi* work in Harbin was at least in part related to the economic reforms: by 1986, more than half of the people that had been trained in Harbin during the first half of the 1980s had been transferred to other jobs.¹⁵ The leadership's remedy was *professionalization* of gazetteer work, with some of the authority to edit manuscripts being transferred from the work units, who were accustomed to having a virtual veto power over the manuscripts, to the City Government Gazetteer Editorial Office (*Ha'erbin renmin zhengfu difangzhi bianzuan bangongshi* 哈尔滨人民政府地方志编纂办公室). This specialized unit was established in 1982 and had its authority boosted by being promoted to the bureau (*ju* 局) level in 1986; it employs a number of professional academics, mostly historians.

While bowing to the need for professionalization of *xinzhi* work the leadership of the Harbin gazetteer project during the 1980s developed an ambitious concept of reforming and modernizing the genre.¹⁶ Traditional gazetteers are normally divided into unlinked sections, and the *xinzhi* of the 1980s and 1990s often reproduce this structure more or less. As regards city gazetteers, the normal pattern is that of a number of specialized gazetteers (*zhuanzhi* 专志) corresponding to the administrative divisions of the city government at the *ju* level, plus a number of local gazetteers compiled at the administrative levels of city district (*qu* 区) or county (*xian* 县), with a general city

¹⁴ Li Guiying 2000a.

¹⁵ Clausen and Thøgersen 1995: 206.

¹⁶ Thøgersen and Clausen 1992: 171-72.

gazetteer (*zongzhi* 总志) topping the whole edifice. This *zongzhi*, however, typically reproduces the bureaucratic divisions already embodied in the *zhuanzhi*, with chapters on the various trades and administrative branches taking up most of the space, and with very few attempts other than a brief general introduction to address issues that transcend bureaucratic or sectoral divisions. In the late 1980s, the Harbin Gazetteer Office proudly proclaimed its intention to produce a *zongzhi* that was unfettered by administrative divisions and able to focus on the *interaction* of the various sectors as well as the interaction of the city with its surrounding world; this aspiration was motivated by the need produced by the economic reforms for a better understanding of the horizontal flows in society, as well as by a desire to facilitate a more dynamic, modern and scientific presentation of the city.¹⁷

The effort turned out to be rather too ambitious. Many different drafts for the “outline” (*pianmu* 篇目) of the *zongzhi* travelled up and down the bureaucratic ladder, only to be rejected or aborted due to inherent problems in the approach. Harbin, which was an early starter and proud to be a pace-setter in gazetteer work, lagged behind other large cities by 1989, and a new crisis of the *fangzhi* project became apparent in 1989-1991. These years were later described by a veteran leader from the Gazetteer Office as “a period of transition”¹⁸; the work structures were reorganized with some changes in the leadership, and the city government intervened in the *pianmu* debate related to the structure and editing of the *zongshu*, settling the issues once and for all. The original plan had been for a dual-track city gazetteer, comprising an integrated *zongshu* and city history in around one hundred parts (*bu* 部), as well as around 150 specialized gazetteers, with a total volume of some five million characters. Now the outline was greatly simplified into a single-track structure with a single-volume *zongshu* on top of 66 *zhuanzhi*, to be published in 36 volumes. But at the same time the target for the total volume of text was raised to fifteen million characters.¹⁹

Equally important, the responsibility system was introduced in Harbin’s gazetteer work in the early 1990s, tying bureaus, large enterprises and other

¹⁷ The ‘Harbin model’ was expounded by Harbin city gazetteer veteran Guan Chenghe in Guan 1988.

¹⁸ Fang Shijun 1994: 14.

¹⁹ Song Hongjun 1992: 25.

work units – a total of 151 units – more closely to the project. At the basic level, around 500 “backbone troops” (*gugan duiwu* 骨干队伍), down from the 2-3,000 people of the 1980s, staffed the writing groups within the units on a part-time or full-time basis. Leaders were made personally responsible for the achievement of gazetteer work targets within their units, with the possibility of earning a bonus or being economically punished in relation to goal achievement: “... and thus gazetteer work became truly a government activity”.²⁰ Henceforth, gazetteers are customarily (and proudly) described as *guanshu* 官书, “official books”. More professional staff and better funding was provided to the project in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, in the annual reports and pronouncements of city gazetteer officials it remains a well-established ritual to praise outstanding gazetteer workers for “withstanding the lure of money, refusing well-paid employment offers”, choosing rather to stick with *difangzhi* work.²¹ And complaints about a continued drain of highly qualified people away from gazetteer work by the units and a general understaffing of local writing groups were still heard in the 1990s.²²

From the early 1990s Lei Feng-type campaigns directed at the gazetteer staff and particularly the unit-based writing groups became a recurrent event. Gazetteer workers are admonished “on the national level, to learn from Yan Juqian; at the local level, learn from Zhao Tian.”²³ The *leitmotif* in the pages of the quarterly journal *Ha’erbin shizhi* is that of self-sacrifice. Doing gazetteer work is presented as ungrateful, unrewarding and not highly respected. Gazetteer workers are constantly exhorted to “fight to the bitter end”, “overcome all hardships”, and similar phrases. During the 1990s, more than 10

²⁰ Fang Shijun 1994: 16.

²¹ Fang Shijun 1994: 16.

²² Jiang Shidong 2000: 3-7.

²³ Zhao Tian was a model gazetteer worker in Harbin who served as the chief editor of the “Harbin Food, Drink, and Service Gazetteer” (*Ha’erbin yinshi fuwu zhi* 哈尔滨饮食服务志), which came out in 1991 as one of the first *zhuanzhi* 专制 to be published. Zhao, a retired Commercial Bureau cadre, had developed an extensive network of informants, conducting more than a thousand interviews with old service trade workers, which he combined with archival research to produce more than 600 pages chronicling in great detail the history of Harbin’s restaurants, hotels, barber shops, parlours, photographers, public baths, etc. Zhao passed away immediately after the completion of his efforts in 1991, already well established by then as a role model for “grassroots” gazetteer workers.

new role models have emerged “with their iron will set on gazetteer work, refusing well-paid job opportunities, continuing work even when sick”.²⁴ Altogether, more than 800 gazetteer workers – out of a total number of some 3,000 persons involved in the project at some stage – have been honoured or rewarded at various ceremonies at the provincial or city level.²⁵

After a race against the deadline of 2000 the results in Harbin so far have been officially confirmed as very satisfactory. The 71 gazetteers in 36 volumes that had been planned for since 1992 were finished on schedule, while the total number of characters had expanded to 38 million, more than doubling the target of 15 million. 57% of the gazetteers have won awards in evaluations at national, provincial and city levels.²⁶ The focus of work has now been shifted to the *xuzhi*; it is scheduled to complete publication by the end of the year 2005 and cover the years 1986/1990 – depending on which year the first-generation gazetteer ends – to the year 2000. It is being compiled at the two levels of city and county / district; the total volume is expected to reach 18 million characters, that is, about half the volume of the already published gazetteers.²⁷

But problems of implementation remain stubborn. A May 2000 notice to all major enterprises and departments by the Harbin People’s Government complains that some unit leaders lack understanding of the significance of gazetteer work and that money for the *xuzhi* effort is not forthcoming at the unit level.²⁸ The budget on the part of the city government for gazetteer work is not public, but it is terribly small. Thus, the cost of publishing the journal *Ha’erbin shizhi* was a mere 16,000 yuan in 1996.²⁹ Most of the staff needs and publishing expenditures must be covered by the units under contract to contribute to the project, and this is the essential and recurring problem of gazetteer work. Complaints about staff “drifting away” continue, as do exhortations to the authorities to secure the livelihood of gazetteer workers. The City Government has stipulated that the monthly remuneration

²⁴ Harbin City Government Gazetteer Editorial Office 1997: 14.

²⁵ Li Guiying 2000a: 9.

²⁶ Harbin Government Office 2000: 3.

²⁷ Li Guiying 2000a: 12.

²⁸ Harbin Government Office 2000: 4.

²⁹ Guo Xianxiang 1997: 21.

offered to retired comrades employed by the *xuzhi* project must not be less than 300 yuan. A total of 130 units have pledged to support writing groups in their units.³⁰ A survey of progress and work conditions in 29 such writing groups, conducted by the City Gazetteer Office in 2000, found that about 20% of the groups performed “fairly well”, another 20% “fairly poorly”, with the rest in between.³¹ But the survey report further states that “during the investigation we realized that wherever there is vigorous leadership, work is progressing smoothly and full of vitality; but when it is not the case, work is lifeless, getting nowhere. Only a minority of units have solved this problem fairly well. Most units do have leadership and structure in place, but strictly speaking, it is only in name and without substance, just empty structures...”.³²

During the 1990s it appears that bureaucratic pronouncements, work reports and discussion papers related to gazetteer work in Harbin have become increasingly ritualized as compared to the publications of the 1980s. Annual work reports from various organs obviously follow standard procedures and have a high proportion of formulaic speech, but it also applies to ordinary articles debating issues of gazetteer work. A case in point is a speech by a gazetteer editor, Guo Xianxiang, at a discussion meeting for editors in 1996.³³ By a rough count, formulaic speech constitutes around one third of the whole text. The entire litany of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, Deng’s Theory and Jiang’s Important Pronouncements is invoked several times, specifically as a remedy for those unfortunate cases where “editors are not up to the mark, and ideology is not up to the mark”.³⁴ Guo reminds his colleagues that from the outset of gazetteer work in Harbin, “it has been particularly emphasized that political mistakes as well as historiographical mistakes are impermissible”,³⁵ and to guard against sloppy gazetteer work it is necessary to “intensify the study of political theory, grasp Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping’s Theory of Socialism with

³⁰ Li Guiying 2000b: 4.

³¹ Jiang Shidong 2000: 3.

³² Jiang Shidong 2000: 4.

³³ Guo Xianxiang 1997.

³⁴ Guo Xianxiang 1997: 20.

³⁵ Guo Xianxiang 1997: 19.

Chinese Characteristics, faithfully implement the Party's line, directives and policies, uphold the ideological line of seeking truth from facts..." etc., etc.³⁶

Gazetteer work in Harbin in the 1990s has been brought back on a more "normal" track, becoming in the process more closely patterned to the bureaucratic logic that reformist gazetteer workers had struggled to overcome in the 1980s. The outcome has turned out to be rather more conforming to national averages and practices than what was to expect judging from the initial decade. But the *problematique* of writing new gazetteers that match the realities of post reform China remains. In a recent article Yang Desheng, a Harbin City Gazetteer official, debates the issue of "Blazing New Trails" in the work of editing *xuzhi*.³⁷ A number of meetings on the *xuzhi* plan during 1999 and 2000 have concluded that the challenge is to "adapt to the processes of social change and the objective laws governing development"; so the next generation of gazetteers should "highlight the characteristics of the times and of the place and pay attention to a systematic structure with many levels, comprehensively and scientifically".³⁸ These were precisely the catchwords of the gazetteer reformers in Harbin in the late 1980s. Yang's critique of the present procedures of *xuzhi* work is merciless: "... the outstanding problem is that of traditionalism, rigidity and formalism".³⁹ To achieve a breakthrough he proposes, first, a change in the basic structure of gazetteer texts. The current plan is to maintain the structure already established in the first generation of gazetteers, i.e. that of individual gazetteers subdivided into parts, chapters and sections; Yang points to the advantages of a structure based on individual articles and entries (*tiaomu* 条目), encyclopaedia-style: "it is superior in terms of highlighting the uniqueness of the times and the place, it allows flexibility in the choice of forms of exposition, it is convenient in avoiding issues of 'jurisdiction', it allows for connotations and cross-references, it has a relatively wide span, and it is powerful in terms of readability and practicality of use".⁴⁰ As a practical compromise, considering the huge amount of preparatory work already invested in the conventional *pian-zhang*

³⁶ Guo Xianxiang 1997: 20.

³⁷ Yang Desheng 2000.

³⁸ Yang Desheng 2000: 5.

³⁹ Yang Desheng 2000: 5.

⁴⁰ Yang Desheng 2000: 5.

篇章 (“parts and chapters”) structure, Yang suggests a combination of the *pian-zhang* and the *tiaomu* principles. Second, Yang proposes that a number of subjects be lifted out of the *pian-zhang* structure for an overall treatment that transcends bureaucratic borders; these subjects should be reform and opening up, the building of ‘spiritual civilization’ (*jingshen wenming* 精神文明), and basic national policies such as family planning. Third, Yang suggest a clean break with the most basic rules of gazetteer writing. The general rule of “presenting [facts, subject matter] without passing judgment” (*xu er bu lun* 叙而不论) should be abandoned; in fact values and evaluations cannot be separated from an historical account. Further, the taboo on writing about persons that are still alive should be lifted. Finally, the style of writing itself is badly in need of reform: “the grave defect of contemporary gazetteer texts is superficiality, formalism and automatism”.⁴¹ The dream of a more integrated, modern and useful kind of gazetteer lives on in Harbin despite the ‘normalization’ of work during the 1990s.

The product: The Harbin City Gazetteer

The publication of the 36 volumes of the Harbin City Gazetteer was capped with the publication, in May 2000, of the *Zongshu* 总述 (“General Outline”) volume, which serves as an introduction to and condensation of the huge mass of *zhuanzhi* (“specialized gazetteers”) volumes. The editing of the *Zongshu* has been the central concern of the many debates throughout the gazetteer project’s evolution, and it is the obvious place to look for an officially endorsed vision of Harbin and its history. It is also the place where the many challenges of contemporary gazetteer work – as discussed above – have to be taken on and the entire minefield of modern history to be crossed: Harbin’s ‘unruly’ – ‘barbarian’ *cum* foreign – past, the political ‘mistakes’ of post-1949 policies, etc. The Harbin *Zongshu* has found a rather creative solution to many of these problems in the way the material is organized. The *Zongshu* is structured in three parts (*pian* 篇):

⁴¹ Yang Desheng 2000: 7.

– The first part, on “Natural Environment and Population”, is devoted to three topics: the environment, the history of the administrative divisions of the city, and finally a chapter on population, which includes data on educational levels and other features of “the quality of the people” (*renmin de suzhi* 人民的素质). The text is packed with facts and figures, most of which are scattered in the text rather than placed in more comprehensive and user-friendly tables; but the facts are there, and the text thus remains useful as a reference work on Harbin. The chapter on the history of the administrative divisions of the city partly overlaps with the relevant chapters of the second, and larger, part.

– The second part is on “The Historical Evolution of Society”; it is a general historical overview, covering Harbin’s prehistory as well as modern history in nine chapters. It would not be unfair to call it the “political part”, since its main function is to tie the anti-imperialist struggles in the city before 1949 and the emergence of communist leadership in Harbin to post-1949 developments. Individual chapters cover standard periods such as the Japanese occupation, the Civil War and the Cultural Revolution, the last chapter being on the Reform Period of the 1980s.

– The third part is on “Economic and Social Undertakings”, once again covering all of Harbin’s history and with a similar periodization of nine chapters, every chapter matching a similar chapter in the second, political-historical, part. But relatively speaking, the emphasis in this part is more on the very recent past, particularly the first reform decade. In the final section of the Reform Period chapter, which is on “The All-round Development of Economy and Society”, economic figures predominate and ‘society’ is conceived of mainly as the consumption needs of the populace; one looks in vain for descriptions of actual social life.

The *Zongshu* describes the emergence of contemporary Chinese Harbin through the processes of ethnic integration, nationalism and revolutionary struggle, political transformation and economic modernization. Reading the text as a whole, it is a narrative structured in six stages, sometimes overlapping but nevertheless distinct:

1) *Becoming a nation*. As for the chapter on the prehistory of the city in the political part, the text starts out by boldly claiming that the ancestors of the

Manchus offered tribute to (legendary) emperor Shun in 2155 BC.⁴² The *leitmotif* of the chapter is that the area of contemporary Heilongjiang, although inhabited by non-Chinese peoples until the 19th century, could only advance through contacts with the Central Plains of the Chinese civilisation; the logic of the narrative is that of the ‘Chinese family of nationalities’, with the minorities uniting around the more advanced Chinese.

2) *Defending sovereignty*. The chapters on the Russian- and Japanese-dominated periods (1896-1945) cover political history, much of it on a general North-eastern level. The focus is consistently on the role of Harbin’s Chinese majority population as a vanguard in the struggle to save China from imperialist aggression. It is a complex storyline because of the metamorphosis of one foreign actor, Russia, from imperialist enemy to revolutionary friend during the period, but the ‘sensitive issues’ in this context – above all the Soviet punitive expedition into Manchuria in 1929 which aroused anti-Soviet nationalist passions among many Chinese in Harbin – are avoided by describing the struggle for sovereignty and the emerging revolutionary forces of the 1920s in two separate sections.

3) *The emergence of the revolutionary subject*. Starting with the establishment of the CCP in 1921, the development of a Harbin CCP party branch becomes an all-important part of the story, and for the period after 1932, the new revolutionary subject takes over as the *leitmotif* of the narrative. Considering the relative insignificance of CCP’s presence in Harbin prior to 1946 – as compared to other large Chinese cities – the emphasis is striking.

4) *Building socialism*. A number of chapters chronicle the history of Harbin during the first decades of the PRC. Here, the narrative faithfully records the rapidly changing policies of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s with no reflection on why these changes happened or why ‘mistakes’ occurred. Once again, much of the text could have covered any large Chinese city of the time. The standard procedure is to paint a bright picture of economic indicators during years when policy was ‘correct’ and to record poor performance during years of ‘incorrect’ policy. Exceptions to this general rule are dutifully recorded, however, together with an explanation as to how these anomalies were possible. For example, Harbin’s remarkably high industrial as well as agricultural

⁴² HSDBW 2000: 97.

growth rates in 1966, which ought to have been a time of disastrous decline due to the onset of the Cultural Revolution, are explained as a product of the continued influences of the ‘correct policies’ from the preceding moderate readjustment period.⁴³

5) *Reforming the Party*: The final chapter of the historical-political part focuses mainly on Party rectification post-Mao and the present ‘struggle against corruption’; but the reader is spared the details of Harbin’s many recent scandals. More curiously, the chapter is silent about the actual reform policies themselves as they have unfolded in Harbin, and it leaves the reader with the impression that the party-state has little to say about the present. The final section of the chapter, on “Building socialist spiritual civilization”, records that a large number of small groups devoted to “studying Lei Feng and establishing a new lifestyle” have emerged in recent years, leading to an “obvious improvement of the social climate”.⁴⁴

6) *Economic development*: reading the *Zongshu* volume in this way, it makes good sense to say that the ‘implicit subject’ of the saga re-emerges toward the final chapter of the economic part. As already noticed, the economic part closely parallels the political part throughout most of the text – with a lot of overlap between the two parts – but in the final chapter on “Reform and Opening Up” the economic part actually takes over the main storyline that had faded out in the political part, i.e. that of introducing the new reform policies and their effects in Harbin. Essentially, the politics and policies of the reform era are systematically transferred to the category of economics. This is a radical version of Deng’s ‘econocentrism’, and the division of the *Zongshu* into the two main parts of politics and economy in itself serves a similar point by giving equal space to the economic part. It allows for nimble manoeuvring in the historical minefield. In this way the editors can describe – faithfully – the collectivization of the 1950s in the political part, and they can rejoice over the decollectivization of the 1980s in the economic part; both collectivization and decollectivization are presented as glorious advances in their separate contexts. According to the logic of the *Zongshu*, the first was politics while the

⁴³ HSDBW 2000: 269.

⁴⁴ HSDBW 2000: 189.

second is economics, with no conflict between the two that needs further explanation.

A critique of the Harbin City Gazetteer

All official pronouncements – such as city mayor Cao Guangliang’s preface reproduced in every single volume of the Harbin City Gazetteer – emphasize the importance of highlighting the “special characteristics” (*tedian* 特点) of Harbin.⁴⁵ But judging from the *Zongshu* volume, the Harbin of the PRC period has few such characteristics; in fact some of the chapters covering the 1949-1990 period could have been about any place in China except for the local names. By comparison, the coverage of the 1946-1949 period, when Harbin played a significant and unique role as the first big city to be permanently held by the forces of the CCP, is rather more lively and interesting. The standard procedure of each chapter, however, is the faithful implementation of Party policy, year after year, by Harbin officials, and a recording of the ensuing results. The viewpoint throughout the volume is strictly that of officialdom; there are very few hints of “life in the city”, and even dramatic events that affected the life of the entire city – such as the great summer flood of 1956 – are scarcely noticed in the text. It is a top-down narrative, an official account that is in many ways very traditional. The style of presentation is matter-of-fact, with a limited effort at analysis, following the rule of “presenting facts without passing judgement”. This feature helps the narrative push its way through the minefield of sensitive issues in PRC history, but it does not really help the reader understand the larger picture of the myriad facts.

A case in point is the treatment, in the historical-political part, of the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957. The narrative chronicles the various central directives and their implementation in Harbin without any effort to explain *why* the movement took place. The logic of the story is that of ‘Harbin proudly advancing in the Anti-Rightist Movement’; the text is basically loyal to the political line of the late 1950s, and there is hardly a hint of repentance.

⁴⁵ HSDBW 2000: 2.

The origin of the Anti-Rightist Movement is stated as “[b]ecause an extremely small number of people took opportunity of the great airing of opinions (in the 1957 Hundred Flowers Movement) to attack the Party and socialism, and further because some extreme emotions and views appeared among the masses, the conditions for Party rectification became for a while more complex”.⁴⁶ The *Zongshu* notes approvingly the “lively debates” and “successful rectification work” of the autumn of 1957 – that is, long after the witch hunts of 1957 had already begun – and proudly records the role of the city’s media in exposing “the crimes of the rightist-deviationists” – first among whom Liu Binyan, the famous writer who had his early career in Harbin and was a prominent victim of the Anti-Rightist Movement.⁴⁷ Other prominent Harbiners were wrongfully accused, however, and the text carefully records the ‘mistaken’ struggles and demotions that hit a number of city leaders, as well as the time and conditions of their eventual rehabilitation. Once again, the text does not pause to ask *why* these ‘mistakes’ did at all happen, why the treatment of movement ‘targets’ became increasingly cruel towards the end of the 1950s, and similar obvious questions. As for the coverage of the “Three Difficult Years”, the general tone once again is that of ‘victoriously advancing amidst difficulties’ with no reflections on what exactly was wrong with the Great Leap Forward and no mention of the nationwide famine.

The specialized gazetteers

The 35 volumes of specialized gazetteers deserve more attention than space allows in this context; a few examples from the many volumes will have to suffice. Volume 36 (1999) containing the two gazetteers *Renwu* 人物 (Biographies) and *Fulu* 附录 (Appendices) is probably the volume with the most obvious relevance for research interests. There are 220 biographies, all of deceased Harbiners, in the “Biographies”, with approximately one full page for each individual. There is no division into separate chapters of the Good People and the Bad People – as was often the case in the traditional

⁴⁶ HSDBW 2000: 152.

⁴⁷ HSDBW 2000: 153.

gazetteers – and there is in fact no visible indication of such a distinction. But the distinction is there, because the first 201 biographies, organized according to year of birth in descending order, turn out to be Good People all and one. Then, without explanation, the year count starts all over again beginning in the 19th century, and the 13 biographies that follow are the biographies of Bad People. Finally, the year count once again starts all over with the last six biographies, who turn out to be not just Bad People, but also Foreigners!⁴⁸ The biographies are generally fact packed, but they leave no doubts as to the positive or negative evaluation of the individuals. These biographies may be seen as contemporary officially approved Memorial Tablets for the two hundred prominent Harbiners who have earned the merit of being mentioned in this gazetteer.

The *Fulu* is the most useful of all the gazetteers to the researcher. The first part is a reproduction of all official documents related to gazetteer work in Harbin. The second part, in one hundred and some pages, records the sources of the gazetteer volumes, providing information on the location and case number of each individual text collection. The third and final part includes brief texts on a number of “issues” (*zhuanli* 专题), such as the history of the Chinese Eastern Railway, and the issue of the exact location at various points of time of the underground Party committee during the 14 years of Japanese occupation.

Volume 29 (1998) on “Political Power” (*Zhengquan* 政权) is a single-gazetteer-volume with 667 pages recording the composition of government bodies throughout the history of the city; long lists of names and meetings take up a considerable part of the text. Amazingly, the volume refuses to mention the CCP, since the text is strictly about governmental structures only. The CCP Harbin branch has its own gazetteer.

The gazetteer on “Public Security” (*Gongan* 公安) has been very approvingly reviewed for doing a good job of piecing together a reliable historical account of the rapidly changing police and public security institutions in pre liberation Harbin.⁴⁹ As for the post-1946 chapters the narrative of this

⁴⁸ HSDBW 1999: *Ha'erbin Shizhi* vol. 36. Again, I owe this observation to Stig Thøgersen.

⁴⁹ Zhao Jingxin and Wang Xiwen 1997.

volume, much as in the *Zongshu* volume discussed above, merely reproduces the official guidelines of the period under examination. Taking 1958 as an example, the text recounts approvingly the “massification and revolutionization” (*qunzhonghua, geminghua* 群众化, 革命化) of the time.⁵⁰ In the presentation of the 1980s, the recurring Strike Hard (*Yanda* 严打) campaigns are featured positively and prominently.⁵¹ Many pages are devoted to listing the names of individuals and units within the *gongan* establishment that have received honourable citations over the years.

Concluding discussion

The contemporary gazetteers coming out in China these years will without doubt constitute a significant source in the future for all kinds of social-scientific research interests in China. The mountain of volumes that cover modern and contemporary Chinese history at various administrative levels, neatly organized in a recognizable format and basically similar structures, offers an inexhaustible supply of detailed information on local geography and infrastructure, population, economic development, local particularities, dialects, local dignitaries, etc. And even when they do not contain the information that the researcher needs, the New Gazetteers often provide clues for further research. Companion volumes of bibliographies and other reference works can be highly useful. Further, the New Gazetteer project has resulted in the collection and preservation of truly vast quantities of source material, all of which are being processed through the New Gazetteer project for final storage in the Archives. And the project has produced considerable spin-offs in other genres of local historical work and publications. But the New Gazetteers also have serious shortcomings. Contemporary leaders like to think of the New Gazetteers as “the foundation of history”,⁵² but it is difficult to imagine the New Gazetteers, tied as they are to a bureaucratic vision of the world, as fertile soil for future Chinese historical studies.

⁵⁰ HSDBW 1996: *Ha'erbin Shizhi* vol. 32: 93.

⁵¹ HSDBW 1996: *Ha'erbin Shizhi* vol. 32: 128-9.

⁵² Li Tieying 1996: 4.

The Harbin City Gazetteer project reflects the bureaucratic logic of *tiao-tiao-kuai-kuai* 条条快快, i.e. the vertical and horizontal divisions of pre reform China; it is poorly equipped for capturing developments in the reform era that often transgress the bureaucratic boundaries of the former planned economy. Attempts at fundamental reform of the gazetteer genre have failed or have not yet materialized. The format of the Harbin City Gazetteer is that of a historical-bureaucratic chronicle which aims, in principle, at an all-encompassing representation and organization of the historical facts. As is often repeated in official pronouncements, the gazetteers' first and most important function is to serve as a practical tool for cadres and leaders, but it is difficult to see how the gazetteer volumes can help achieve this goal, and the persistent problem, evident from several official statements on gazetteer work in Harbin, of making units subscribe to the Harbin City Gazetteer (not to mention paying for it!) would indicate that many cadres see it this way, too.

The new gazetteers are uniquely Chinese. Everywhere in the world one can find institutions that deal with local history writing. Biographies are written, city histories are published, local history enthusiasts have their learned societies and publications. City governments are sometimes involved as sponsors of some features of such local historical research. But nowhere does one find anything similar to the Chinese approach of putting all of this and much more together in one all-encompassing and vast body of text that requires official approval of every word written. The New Gazetteers can be seen as the expression of a bureaucratic vision of society. In a sense, they attempt to order and pacify the world by means of the gazetteer framework, just like traditional gazetteers, with their ritualistic invocation of *nangeng nüzhì* 男耕女织 (“the husband plows and the wife weaves”), *liè nǚ* 烈女 (“chaste women”), etc., also exhibit this kind of vision. But the bureaucratic structure that commands this ordering is itself being torn by the changes of reform and opening-up, and some features of the Confucian-Leninist state are themselves becoming similarly fictional. The crisscrossing of the market economy and new social structures are already rendering the bureaucratic structure of the gazetteers obsolete. The challenges to the next generation of gazetteers in China are formidable, and it will be instructive to see how the challenges are met when the *xuzhi* volumes start pouring out in 2005.

Officially sponsored local history in Harbin, and in particular the New Gazetteers, is all about writing Harbin, and all of the Northeast, “into” China. It is not just a matter of what is said – writing gazetteers is in itself a process of making Harbin truly Chinese. This is the most basic feature of the ideological purposes of the New Gazetteers; by applying a uniquely Chinese tradition, the historical terrain covered by the gazetteer volumes is reinforced as truly Chinese territory. But gazetteers should also serve practical purposes. Thus the endless exhortations in the pages of the journal *Ha’erbin Shizhi* to remember the “social functions” of the gazetteers, usually summarized as the trinity of “assisting government” (*zizhi* 资志), “preserving history” (*cunshi* 存史), and “education” (*jiaohua* 教化). To take the latter first, it is difficult to imagine the many Harbin City Gazetteer volumes finding much of a readership among the general public. As for the preservation of history, this job could easily have been achieved within the normal framework of archives, libraries and specialized research institutions; it is difficult to see why it would be necessary to establish a large organization involving thousands of individuals to serve this purpose. An even the purpose of “assisting government” can hardly be said to have been met by the Harbin City Gazetteer. The volumes will no doubt sit on the shelves of government offices in Harbin, and they will probably be used as works of reference, but once again: if the purpose is to provide cadres with a deeper understanding of the historical background to this or that issue, one could think of much better ways of achieving it – as Yang Desheng and other critics from within the project have repeatedly pointed out; the fact-oriented narrative of the gazetteer volumes, with a great sensitivity to the bounds of political correctness, does not provide discussions, critical examinations, or synthesis. Ordinary Harbiners will probably find the Harbin City Gazetteer of little use in their own lives. The problems related to making work units buy the many volumes are revealing; the City Gazetteer is impossible to read in its entirety, and it is not very practical – although indispensable for certain research purposes – as a reference tool (efforts to commit the information of the gazetteers to an electronic database open for internet users are proceeding, however). For the local “city booster” or the local history enthusiast, further, the Harbin City Gazetteer has little to offer despite declared intentions to the contrary. Perhaps the more lively gazetteers today are those being compiled at lower levels such as townships (*xiang* 乡) and enterprise; judging from the case of Harbin, the officially

sanctioned gazetteer work of the 1990s has lost much of the pioneering spirit and creativity of the 1980s.

In conclusion, the New Gazetteers are intensely political. The sensitivity to issues of political correctness is every bit as pronounced as it was in the pre-reform era. The volumes do cover the entire terrain of the historical landscape, but 'sensitive issues' form little black holes in the text, distorting its shape, or they create expanses of blankness shrouded in clouds of unconnected facts. Still, the gazetteers are an important investment by the CCP leadership in the ongoing struggle over the control of memory in China. The gazetteers represent the officially sanctioned common history, and unofficial gazetteers and other unauthorized local histories are a threat to this monopoly of memory. Li Peng made a significant remark about this in 1996, when he said that: "[w]hat should be noticed is that at the moment the phenomenon of writing family or clan genealogies (*jiapu* 家谱; *zupu* 族谱) has appeared in some localities; this is a feudalistic kind of activity which is at odds with the needs of the construction of socialist civilization and should be corrected".⁵³ The New Gazetteers may end up as the last bastion of a party-bureaucracy struggling to be remembered.

⁵³ Li Peng 1996: 2.

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