Metalanguages of Song Official Historiography: Discourses and Practices of Veracity and Verification in the *Veritable Records of Emperor Shenzong* and Li Tao’s *Long Draft*

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Throughout the late Northern Song factional conflict, official historians on both sides fought over which source texts to include and exclude from the period’s official history, in order to impart a reformist or anti-reformist interpretation of the recent past: the Shenzong 神宗 (1068-85), Zhezong 哲宗 (1085-1100), and Huizong 徽宗 reigns (1100-26). With each abrupt transition from one factional ministerial regime to another, the current winners of the factional conflict wrote and revised its recent history. Historical truths were highly subjective and situational, and veracious facts and verifiable accounts were whatever the Emperor’s chosen ministers said they were, backed up by the ultimate authority of the throne. When the monarch’s chosen slate of ministers discussed how to interpret recent political history, they used a binary mode of rhetoric to distinguish the distortions and lies crafted by the malevolent and factious opposition from the verifiable truths that their own ministerial regime produced. By altering the documentary record of the factional conflict, official historians denied legitimate authority to their political and ideological adversaries, while tacitly reserving it for themselves.

This paper will unearth the complex and multi-layered textual history of the *Veritable Records of Emperor Shenzong* (Shenzong shilu 神宗實錄), whose compilation oscillated between two polarized ideological visions of the Shenzong reign: a 1091 anti-reformist first version, a 1096 reformist revision, and a 1138 anti-reformist final version. But what made one interpretation of the past more veracious than another? Despite their acute and chronic ideological differences, court historians and their ministerial superiors assumed that like-minded readers would immediately grasp what they saw as an obvious difference between the superior and petty men who served the throne, and between a factual and erroneous account of the recent past.

While these three editions of this text are no longer extant, traces of their lengthy gestation period can be found within the surviving historical records of the Song, which was ultimately derived from the *Veritable Records* of later reigns. Substantial fragments of them have been preserved when they were copied into privately-compiled works of historiography in the late twelfth century. The most substantial chronicle of Northern Song court politics, Li Tao’s 李燾 (1115–1184) *Long Draft of the Continuation of the Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance* (Xu zizhi tongjian changbian 續資治通鑑長編) of 1183, was distilled and compressed from the *Veritable Records*. Through a textual archaeology of the *Long Draft* chapters covering the Shenzong reign, this paper will reconstruct Li Tao’s working methods, and more important, the languages that Li Tao used to justify the inclusion and exclusion of the three versions of the *Shenzong shilu*, as well as the metalanguage that he and his readership shared when they assessed the veracity of a given source text. Li was engaged in a restoration project, stripping away the pro-reformist biases of the 1096 edition—and to a lesser extent, undoing the over-corrections of the 1138 edition—in order to produce a replica of the 1091 edition that preserved its compilers’ original intent and presented a verifiably veracious account of the Shenzong reign. But unlike the compilers of the *Shenzong shilu*, suppressing evidence is something that Li Tao generally avoided. Fullest disclosure of the broadest range of source texts coincided with Li’s tacit assumption that the greater the number of mutually-reinforcing data points, the greater the verifiability and veracity of a source text, and the lesser the risk of revisionist tampering.