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DOCUMENTARY RECORDS OF THE PREVENTION OF SCHISTOSOMIASIS IN CHINA

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Schistosomiasis japonica, a water-borne and snail-transmitted parasitic disease, has a long history in China. According to archaeological studies, the disease can be traced back to 2000 years ago. Schistosomiasis japonica eggs were found in a female corpse excavated in the Mawangdui tomb in Hunan province in 1973. In recent years, due to the Three Gorges Dam construction on the Yangtze River, schistosomiasis spread widely again. The disease has become a hot issue in China. It is estimated that over eight hundred thousand people were infected with schistosomiasis and 6.5 million people were at risk in 2005. More importantly, the number of people being infected by the parasite is increasing every year.

Schistosomiasis japonica is a disease of tropical and subtropical areas where water snails, an intermediate host, live. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), southern provinces such as Anhui, Fujian, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, and Zhejiang, regions where the disease prevails, began a campaign against it. In 1956, Mao Zedong started a mass campaign to fight schistosomiasis, adopting the slogan “Schistosomiasis has to be eliminated.” On 30 June 1958, Chairman Mao read in the People’s Daily news from Yujiang county (in Jiangxi Province) about the elimination of schistosomiasis. Mao was so happy he could not sleep, and then wrote a poem, entitled “Farewell to the Plague Spirit,” to commemorate the campaign in Yujiang county. During the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, no one would believe that the PRC could eliminate the disease in all provinces. However, by the 1970s, the disease had been brought under control in some counties and provinces, due to Mao’s political will. The achievement made by the PRC in controlling Schistosomiasis startled the world.

How was the PRC able to control schistosomiasis? How did provincial governments and local communes become involved in the campaign against the disease? How did the PRC central and provincial governments mobilize the masses and educate people? How was control achieved, especially in light of the fact that today schistosomiasis is common again in China? When researching and trying to answer these questions about schistosomiasis in China, scholars seldom resort to two kinds of records. One of them is usually called “xue fang zhi”, a simplified name which means “record of the prevention of schistosomiasis” or “record of anti-schistosomiasis”, and the other, “xue xi chong bing liu xing qing kuang he fang zhi gong zuo zi liao hui bian,” which means “collected data on the prevalence and prevention of schistosomiasis.”

Chinese historians have a long tradition of writing local history, which is usually called “di fang zhi” or “local gazetteer,” a type of writing that records the history, people, geography, and customs of a province, a county or a city. The “record of the prevention of schistosomiasis” is unique in the way it focuses on a single disease. China does not have records of the prevention of smallpox, cholera, and leprosy.

In my research, I found 31 records of the prevention of schistosomiasis, which can be categorized into three levels.

Provincial level:
1.) Editorial team (ed), 1990. Anhui xue xi chong bing fang zhi zhi (Record of the prevention and history of schistosomiasis in Anhui province), Hefei: Huang Shan shu she.

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1 Schistosomiasis in China project, UC Berkeley. Visit URL: http://ehs.sph.berkeley.edu/china/.
County Level:
4.) Li Yezhi (ed), 1980.  Nan xian xue fang zhi (Record of the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Nan County [Hunan province]), no place of publication or publisher.
6.) The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control Appointed by the Communist Party of Yuenjiang County (ed), 1983.  Yuenjiang xian xue fang zhi (Record of the prevention of schistosomiasis in Yuenjiang County [of Hunan province]), no place of publication or publisher.
9.) The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control Appointed by the Communist Party of Rudong County and the Station for Public Health and Hygiene of Rudong County, Jiangsu province (eds), 1987.  Rudong xian xue fang shi 1957-1986 (History of the prevention of schistosomiasis in Rudong county [Jiangsu province]), no place of publication or publisher.
10.) The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control Appointed by the Communist Party of Ningguo County and the Station for the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Ningguo County (eds), 1988.  Ningguo xian xue fang zhi (Record of the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Ningguo County [Anhui province]), no place of publication or publisher.
11.) Zhou Yongzeng (ed), 1989.  Wuxi xian xue fang zhi (Record of the prevention of schistosomiasis in Wuxi County [Jiangsu province]), no place of publication or publisher.
12.) Editorial team for Record of the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Huarong County (ed), 1990.  Huarong xian xue fang zhi (Record of the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Huarong county [Hunan province]), Shanghai: East Normal University Press.
14.) The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control Appointed by the Communist Party of Jiangdu County (ed), 1982.  Jiangdu xian xue fang zhi (Record of the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Jiangdu county [Jiangsu province]), no place of publication or publisher.

City Level:
17.) Lin Guinan (ed), 1984.  Anqing shi xue fang zhi (Record of the prevention of schistosomiasis in Anqing city [Anhui]), no place of publication or publisher.
18.) Qiu Yici, 1997.  Qu zhou xue fang zhi (Record of the prevention of schistosomiasis in Quzhou city [Anhui province]), no place of publication or publisher.
19.) The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control and Endemic Diseases Appointed by the Communist Party of Yancheng city (eds), 1986.  Yancheng shi xue fang zhi 1954-1986 (Record of the prevention of schistosomiasis in Yancheng city [Jiangsu province]), no place of publication or publisher.
In addition, the author also collected six books about the prevention of schistosomiasis, called “zi liao hui bian” or “zi liao tu biao ji,” which usually have the same written pattern as “record of prevention of schistosomiasis”, although they do not necessarily carry the title “xue fang zhi.”


24.) The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control Appointed by the Communist Party of Huanggang county and Station for the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Huanggang county (eds), 1980. Hu bei sheng Huanggang Xian xue xi chong bing liu xing qing kuang he fang zhi gong zuo zi liao hui bian 1955-1979 (Collected data of the prevalence and prevention of schistosomiasis in Huanggang county, Hubei province), no place of publication or publisher.

25.) The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control Appointed by the Communist Party of Huangmei county and Station for the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Huangmei county (eds), 1980. Hu bei sheng Huangmei Xian xue xi chong bing liu xing qing kuang he fang zhi gong zuo zi liao hui bian 1953-1979 (Collected data of the prevalence and prevention of schistosomiasis in Huangmei county, Hubei province), no place of publication or publisher.*

26.) The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control Appointed by the Communist Party of Qichun county and Station for the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Qichun county (eds), 1980. Hu bei sheng Qichun Xian xue xi chong bing liu xing qing kuang he fang zhi gong zuo zi liao hui bian 1956-1980 (Collected data of the prevalence and prevention of schistosomiasis in Qichun county, Hubei province), no place of publication or publisher.

27.) The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control Appointed by the Communist Party of Xinzhou county and Station for the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Xinzhou county (eds), 1980. Hu bei sheng Xinzhou Xian xue xi chong bing liu xing qing kuang he fang zhi gong zuo zi liao hui bian 1956-1980 (Collected data of the prevalence and prevention of schistosomiasis in Xinzhou county, Hubei province), no place of publication or publisher.*

28.) The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control Appointed by the Communist Party of Huanggang county and Station for the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Huanggang county (eds), 1981. Fang zhi xue xi chong bing zi liao hui bian 1955-1979 (Collected data of the prevalence and prevention of schistosomiasis [in Huanggang county, Hubei province]), no place of publication or publisher.

29.) The Leading Group Office for Endemic Diseases Appointed by the Communist Party of Yanbian county and Station for the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Yanbian county (eds), 1986. Sichuan sheng Yanbian Xian xue xi chong bing liu xing qing kuang he fang zhi gong zuo zi liao hui bian 1958-1984 (Collected data of the prevalence and prevention of schistosomiasis in Yanbian county, Sichuan province), no place of publication or publisher.

30.) The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control Appointed by the Communist Party of Jiangsu province and Station for the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Jiangsu province (eds), 1983. Jiangsu sheng xue xi chong bing fang zhi zi liao tu biao ji 1952-1980 (Collection of statistics and charts data of the prevalence of schistosomiasis in Jiangsu province), no place of publication or publisher.

31.) The Institute of the Prevention of Schistosomiasis in Shanghai City (ed), 1985. Shanghai shi xiao mie xue xi chong bing zhi liao tu biao ji (Collection of statistics and charts data of the elimination of schistosomiasis in Shanghai city), no place of publication or publisher.

Most of these materials are for “internal use only.” They were not formally published, and most were marked “internal publication” (or even “confidential”) and have no publication data. They were

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If a book is marked “internal publication”, it means that its contents may be related to a sensitive political issue which can not be disclosed and the book can not be sold to ordinary people.
usually published by the local Department of Health or The Leading Group Office for Schistosomiasis Control; they were not formally circulated and were only served as reference for local departments, due to the fact that the PRC regarded the epidemic of schistosomiasis as top secret. It is not easy to obtain these materials because of their limited circulation and the limited number of copies, but it is not impossible to obtain them when Internet rose as an important commercial tool. According to the author’s investigation, these materials have been ignored in the past. Actually, these materials are very important for medical researchers and epidemiologists attempting to trace the history of campaigns aiming to eliminate or reduce the prevalence of schistosomiasis in provinces in the past 50 years.

Any document that constitutes a “record of the prevention of schistosomiasis” usually has its own written pattern which includes the following chapters: geography, climate, map and environment of the place; organization of campaign for the prevention of schistosomiasis; history of prevalence of schistosomiasis; investigation of patients of schistosomiasis; investigation of the distribution of fresh water snails and work done to eliminate the snails; methods taken to protect humans and animals; health education about schistosomiasis; research into treating the disease and elimination of the snails; and experience and contribution of those fighting schistosomiasis. These materials are useful for anyone who wants to understand how provinces, counties and cities in China went about preventing and treating the disease and educating people.

Having seen these records, I suggest that the following kinds of important data can be obtained:

First, for medical researchers and epidemiologists the interest lies in the access these records provide to many surveys and statistical analyses carried out by local experts, based on local achievements. These allow many questions to be asked, such as: How many people need to be mobilized to fight the fresh water snails in a province, county or city? Over how wide an area are snails to be eliminated? How many people (rates of male and female) are infected and needed treatments? How much is the approximate cost for the prevention of the disease?

Second, these books usually have documents attached to them about anti-schistosomiasis measures delivered by the Central Government or by local government in of the PRC.

Third, these books usually have illustrations attached through which we can easily understand what methods were used to eliminate snails.

For health science researchers the interest in these records lies in their ability to answer questions such as how did the PRC and local government went about educating farmers and the illiterate common people to help prevent schistosomiasis through movies, education seminars, slide shows, illustrated booklets and primers? How did they mobilize bare-foot doctors to treat the disease? Taking Anhui as an example, in order to communicate word about the menace of schistosomiasis, Anhui province played anti-schistosomiasis movies over 5400 times all over the province during 1964-1985. Among the movies, “Ku mu feng chun” (getting a new lease of life) was a famous one, which told the story of two lovers, who became infected with schistosomiasis and found themselves in a difficult situation. Due to Mao’s campaign against schistosomiasis, people were treated with the aid of the Communist Party and the Central Government. Needless to say, one of the purposes of the movie was to praise the Communist Party and the PRC; however, it cannot be denied that the movie also communicated the news of the menace of schistosomiasis.

For historians, the history of diseases in the People’s Republic of China is still virgin soil. The historical records of schistosomiasis should help construct the historical picture related to how the PRC government, central and local, dealt with such a fatal disease.

Some scholars may be of the view that any data disclosed by official institutes in China should not be totally trusted. I agree that these data should be considered with caution, but I also believe that no researcher can afford to ignore these materials if he or she wants to study efforts at controlling schistosomiasis in China in the past 50 years.

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5 For example, American Schistosomiasis delegation went to China for investigation on the epidemic of schistosomiasis in 1975. PRC set many obstacles so that the delegation could not investigation deeply. George Bush, Looking Forward, New York: Doubleday, 1987, p.136-137.