ABSTRACT

Due to the influences of factors such as historical development, political constitution and changes in the emperor-official relationship, the issue of loyalty or treachery of historical personages fills with contradictions. As the criteria of attributing an official as “loyal” or a “treacherous” are complex and vary according to respective periods and individuals, it is difficult for historians to make a completely just, objective and acceptable-to-all conclusion when they evaluate historical figures on the issue of loyalty and treachery. Commenting on the issue of loyalty or treachery of historical figures, therefore, is an exceedingly difficult and risky task.

Nevertheless, many historians (especially those in the olden days) had to compellingly divide historical figures as loyal or treacherous because of the political objectives of rulers and their own duty as historians to praise or blame historical figures. And as the loyalty/treachery criteria are highly controversial, the evaluation of historians may not be accurate or representative of the views of contemporaries, let alone acceptable to posterity.
The Biography of Treacherous Officials in the Ming Shi (History of Ming Dynasty) is one such example. In order to direct the officials' loyalty towards the regime, the Qing rulers purposely ordered the writing of The Biography of Treacherous Officials in the Ming Shi. However, not every treacherous official listed was as extremely wicked as recorded in The Biography of Treacherous Officials, and therefore villainous enough to be labeled as a "treacherous official". Posterity has questioned, criticized and even reversed such extreme accusations.

Through the investigation of the common standards of categorizing officials as "loyal" or "treacherous", and by placing them in comparison to the records in The Biography of Treacherous Officials in the Ming Shi, this essay will explore the complexities and the contradictions involved in the issue of loyalty or treachery of historical figures. At the same time, through this essay, I hope to present a fairer and more objective appraisal of some of the historical figures listed in the Ming Shi, unlike traditional evaluation that denies the political contributions and character of these "treacherous officials".