

4.12 SIMA QIAN AND OUR VIEW OF EARLY CHINA

As we have frequently had occasion to note, in the study of early China we owe the greatest debt to Sima Qian, the Grand Historian of the court of Wu-di. We have already discussed certain aspects of the composition of the *Shiji*, particularly with regard to their bearing upon the account of Wu-di. Because of the issues of bias and reliability raised earlier, it makes sense to examine these circumstances in more detail. But the real reason for closing these course readings with a summary of Sima Qian's biography and historical methods, and the text of a famous and plaintive letter written to a friend, is to acknowledge the contribution that Sima Qian has made to all later understanding of ancient China. The scale of his text (which runs over 3000 pages in modern commentary editions) and its pervasive sensitivity, intelligence, and sense of value are unmatched anywhere in the ancient world.

Sima Qian's biography

Sima Qian was the son of the Han court historian and inherited the position of his father, Sima Tan. The office of historian was not at that time confined to issues that we now think of as historical. The historian was principally an archivist and an astrologer. In an age when the rhythms of the heavens and of the earth were considered to bear so closely on the conduct of government, the position of court astrologer was an important one, and prior to Sima Tan it is likely that "historians" had paid little attention to organizing the records of the past.

Sima Qian was born about 145 B.C. His father, whose basic ideas and values were reported by his son in an autobiographical afterword to the *Shiji*, was inclined towards the values of the Daoists. But he was an intelligent and eclectic man, and he had his son study widely. Among the teachers to whom he sent Sima Qian was Dong Zhongshu, who would have been at the height of his influence at that time.

While we tend to associate Dong first with his influence on Wu-di's personnel policies and second with his yin-yang omenology, in his own time he was chiefly celebrated as a master of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. One of the features of early Han *Annals* scholarship was the belief that Confucius had chosen to edit the *Annals* and implant his wisdom therein because he felt that "to discuss the Dao through empty theory would not be so effective as to illustrate its workings through action and event." We may assume that Sima Qian was thoroughly instructed in this notion, and it makes sense to see the *Shiji* as displaying his portrait of the eternal Dao through the coloration he gives to his account of the changing past.

But it was Sima Tan, rather than his son, who seems first to have conceived of the project of writing a history of the world (which is to say, China). In his account of his father's death, Sima Qian records his words to this effect.

Our ancestors were grand historians for the house of Zhou. From the most ancient times they were eminent and renowned when in the days of Yu and the Xia they were in charge of astronomical affairs.* In later ages our family declined. Will this tradition end with me? If you in turn become grand historian, you must continue the work of your ancestors.

You must not forget what I have desired to express through my writing. Filiality begins with the serving of your parents; next you must serve your sovereign; finally, you must make something of yourself so that your name may go down through the ages to the glory of your father and mother. This is the most important aspect of filiality.

Now the various feudal states have merged into one and the records of the old chronicles and records have become scattered and lost. The house of Han has arisen and all the world is united under one rule. I have been grand historian, and yet I have failed to make a record of all the enlightened rulers and wise lords, the faithful ministers and gentlemen who were prepared to die for what was right. I am fearful that the historical materials will be neglected and lost. You must remember and think of this!

(*Shiji* 130.3295)

Sima Qian records his own tearful response, in which he pledged that he would do as his father wished. From the time that Sima Tan died in 110 until his own death about the year 90 B.C., Sima Qian devoted himself whole-heartedly to the recovery of ancient records, their organization and verification, and the writing of the *Shiji*.

In 98, the incident that became the turning point of Sima Qian's career occurred. A general named Li Ling, who was pursuing Wu-di's campaigns against the Xiongnu, was ambushed by a far superior force. Facing certain defeat, he chose to surrender, thus, in Wu-di's eyes, violating the code of conduct of a Han military leader. Li Ling was associated with certain factions at court, and their enemies seized the occasion of his failure to excoriate him in the hope of discrediting others. When Sima Qian, who was apparently connected with neither faction, sent a memo courageously supporting Li Ling, the emperor was led to understand that the historian was acting as the dupe of a party anxious to undermine Wu-di's authority. Consequently, he ordered that Sima Qian be sentenced to castration.

This arbitrary and brutal response to what he himself regarded as a courageous memorial loyal to the interests of the throne threw Sima Qian into dismay. There existed two possible alternatives to undergoing the punishment of castration, which was the most shameful of all punishments short of execution. The first was to redeem his sentence through a cash payment (such as was noted in our examination of Qin law). The second was to follow the code of the gentleman and commit suicide. Unfortunately, the redemption price for his sentence was simply beyond his means. And to commit suicide, while honorable before the world, meant that Sima

*Compare with the language of the *Shi Qiang pan*, #72 among the Western Zhou inscriptions in reading 3.10.

Qian would be forswearing his deathbed promise to his father, and act whose unfiliality was past measure. In the end, Sima Qian chose to suffer disgrace, aware that he would be regarded as a coward not only for having failed to take his life honorably, but also for having behaved in this way as a consequence of defending a man who had likewise chosen dishonor over suicide.

Although the biography of Sima Qian that appears in the *History of the Former Han* indicates that Wu-di later regretted his harshness towards Sima Qian and honored him at court with many signs of personal favor, it is clear from a letter written by the historian shortly before his death that the pain of his disgrace remained keen to the end of his life. Nevertheless, he did persist in fulfilling his promise to his father, and when he died, the *Shiji* was substantially complete.

The principles of composition of the Shiji

The task that Sima Qian undertook in writing a universal history was prodigious. No one had attempted anything like it before. He had to plan the organization of the text and read widely to become fully informed about the outline of the past. But more than that, he had to search out evidence. There existed no catalogue of texts, no libraries, no bibliographies or footnotes. He must have unearthed some of his evidence in the imperial archives. For example, he draws heavily from the *Zuozhuan*, which was at this time unknown in China. Sima Qian probably unearthed the base texts of the *Zuozhuan* by searching through the palace archives in Chang'an, where bolts of silk texts and strings of inscribed bamboo strips had long been piled.

But in addition to reading what was available at the capital, Sima Qian traveled all over China searching for texts, inquiring about local traditions, and journeying to the places where events had occurred so that he could better understand exactly what had transpired.

As he collected evidence, Sima Qian carefully sifted it for reliability. In cases where evidence was abundant, he formed judgments concerning the actual course of events and eliminated evidence that appeared to him to be fabricated. In cases where evidence was very scarce, such as in the biography of Laozi, he simply brought together all available traditions, alerted readers as to his own uncertainty, and left the judgment to the future. Sima Qian viewed this sort of judicious skepticism as part of the Confucian tradition, for Confucius himself had, in the *Analects*, praised historians who were willing to put aside what was of doubtful veracity and leave blanks in their accounts rather than perpetuate gossip.

And here we can also ask to what degree Sima Qian may have followed the practices of Confucius in editing the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, as they were understood during the early Han. Confucius, the tradition claimed, had viewed history writing as a means of conveying the Dao rather than as a means of preserving facts. He had actually tampered with the completed annals of the court of Lu, altering the words of the scribes in order to enable the reader to see through the facts to the "Truth." When the case of the "Monograph on the *Fengshan* Sacrifices" was discussed earlier, we noted that it was possible that its grossly unflattering portrait of Wu-di could have been a product of Sima Qian's personal resentment. Alternatively, the material could be true, or the chapter could be a later forgery, inserted in the *Shiji* to support latter day court

factions opposed to the example of Wu-di. While we cannot determine the answer with certainty, we can note one additional factor which makes it less likely that the “Monograph” was part of an attempt by Sima Qian to model his work on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

One of the features of the *Annals*, once again, as it was understood in the Han, was the surpassing subtlety of its alterations of literal history. The change of a preposition here, the choice of a different form of appellation there – these were the methods that Confucius had supposedly used to embed moral meaning in history. That was why *Annals* studies had generated exegetical schools that fought tooth and nail over the significance of every exclamatory particle in the text. Confucius was writing in times of trouble, when speech was dangerous. He wrote between the lines for the “sages” of the future, a message to utopia from hell.

The portrait of Wu-di that emerges from the “Monograph” hardly conforms to those criteria, and if Sima Qian were indeed writing history as a form of protest against autocratic tyranny – with which he had profound experience – he would surely have been more careful.

And he was careful. Close examination of other chapters in the text does indeed reveal places where Sima Qian, by an apt but unstressed phrase, conveys very pointed judgment of the people and events about which he writes. One example would be the closing remark in his discussion of Wen-di, where he praises as *ren* Wen-di’s restraint in declining to stage the *fengshan* sacrifices. What more pointed rebuke of Wu-di’s attitude towards his religious role need there be? The historian’s judgment is plain enough, and the subtlety of the remark resonates with the training that Sima Qian would have received from Dong Zhongshu.

An example of the ways in which such notions of historiography may have influenced the actual narratives themselves may perhaps be seen in the biographical accounts of Xiang Yu and Liu Bang. Both portraits include many contradictions. Some readers claim that we can read from these Sima Qian’s preference for one or the other of these men, and that would be bias indeed. But perhaps what we see is more subtle again. It is more consistent with the narratives to see Sima Qian as attempting to select evidence that illustrates all aspects of the personalities of these two adversaries without selecting between them, instead marking clearly what is praiseworthy in each and what may be deplored.

In Sima Qian’s portrait of Liu Bang, for example, we read both about his personal obnoxiousness and also about his modesty and willingness to give credit to others. We see his bravery in denouncing Xiang Yu’s misbehaviors, point by point, to his face, but we also see his matchless cowardice in thrice kicking his own children out of his chariot as he fled from his pursuers after the battle of Pengcheng. What emerges from this is an image of the Han founder that, while perhaps including as much legend as fact, may actually capture the complexity of the man as he was, while allowing the reader to view him through the ethically appraising eye of the historian.

The Letter to Ren An

Shortly before he died, a personal friend of Sima Qian named Ren An (his polite name was Ren Shaoqing) addressed to him a plea for help. Ren An had been caught up in the early stages of the witchcraft scandal of 91 B.C. and was under indictment for a capital offense. He hoped that Sima Qian would use his influence at court to help him evade the penalty to which he had been sentenced. In reply, Sima Qian wrote Ren An a long letter, explaining why he did not believe he would be able to help, and detailing the history of his own sad encounter with Wu-di's vengeance. Together with the concluding chapter of the *Shiji*, which Sima Qian devoted to the story of his own life, the letter to Ren An is the earliest piece of sustained autobiographical writing that we possess from China. The letter includes a number of extended passages that appear nearly verbatim in Sima Qian's *Shiji* autobiography, and so it would seem, if our record of it is indeed accurate, that although it was a personal letter to a friend, it also represents Sima Qian's reflective effort to portray and justify himself to the world.

Ren An did not manage to evade the consequences of the scandal, and he was executed soon after Sima Qian's letter was written. Sima Qian himself probably died within the year. The letter that he wrote somehow was conveyed years later to the hands of Ban Gu, the author of the *History of the Former Han*. Ban Gu, who was himself engaged in emulating Sima Qian's example of writing a great history, included the entire letter in his biography of Sima Qian.

The letter appears below in full. Its many allusions to past people and events recounted in the *Shiji* may seem distractions from the point to a modern reader, but they convey the universe of imagined history that shaped the world for Sima Qian, and we can see from his letter that the past he had studied so exhaustively had come to form the framework within which he understood his own actions.

Sima Qian's Letter to Ren An (Shaoqing)

The Grand Historian, your servant Sima Qian, bows repeatedly to you, my eminent friend Shaoqing.

Some time ago you deigned to send a letter advising me to take care in my affairs and to devote myself bringing able men to the attention of others and recommending them for office. You conveyed your thoughts with great vigor, as though anticipating that I would not look upon you as a suitable teacher and would instead adopt the advice of some common companions. I would never dare act in such a way. Although merely a worn out workhorse now, yet once I listened by the side of my elders and I bear the legacy of their standards.

However, I look at myself now, mutilated in body and living in vile disgrace, criticized for my every action, harming whatever I hope aid – I am wracked with melancholy, but with whom can I share my thoughts? And so, I must reply to you with the old saying: “On whose behalf could I stir when my words would never be heard?” After Zhong Ziqi died Boya never again played his zither.¹ Why not? “A man acts in light of a friend who knows his heart, for a woman at her mirror a lover inspires her art.” As for me, I am merely a man of damaged substance. Though my mettle were like the pearl of Sui and the jade of Bian He² or my conduct like Xu You or Bo Yi,³ there can be no glory for me, I would only be laughed at and covered in shame.

What you wrote in your letter deserved a reply, but it arrived just as I was returning east to the capital in the retinue of the emperor. I became preoccupied with trivial affairs and, as I seldom ran into you, in the press of events there never seemed to be a moment when I could unburden myself of what I truly wished to say to you. And now you, Shaoqing, have fallen under an unthinkable sentence. The weeks and month have passed, winter is upon us, and I must soon leave to accompany the emperor to Yong. I fear that the unspeakable will soon come to pass and I shall never have the chance to express my anguish and explain myself to you, my friend.⁴ If that came to pass, then when its time came my departed soul would forever bear a solitary anguish. I beg your leave to lay out my worthless thoughts, and pray that you will be kind enough to forgive me for my long failure to answer you.

¹ Zhong Ziqi knew the musician Boya so intimately that he could read Boya's thoughts by his playing. Once Ziqi was dead, performance lost its meaning for Boya.

² Two Warring States era legends. The Marquis of Sui rescued a wounded snake that turned out to be a spirit and rewarded him with a jade; Bian He's jade in the rough was rejected by two rulers of Chu who ordered Bian He's feet amputated as punishment for his presumption; a third ruler, moved by his pleas, discovered the jade's beauty.

³ The *Zhuangzi* tells of the sage Xu You, who declined Yao's offer of the throne; Bo Yi and his brother Shu Qi starved rather than serve as subjects of the Zhou, whose conquest of the Shang they saw as immoral (*Shiji* 61).

⁴Capital sentences were carried out in the twelfth month. Sima Qian is referring to Ren An's imminent execution.

I have heard it said that self-cultivation is the mark of wisdom, a love of sharing the font of humanity (*ren*), an exemplary pattern of taking and giving the measure of righteousness, a response of shame to any disgrace the index of bravery, and the goal of establishing an enduring reputation the ultimate model of conduct. Only if a gentleman possesses all five will he earn the trust of his generation and be ranked among the *junzi* of the world. But nothing is so disastrous to a man as a lust for profit, no sadness is so painful as a wounded heart, no conduct is so shameful as disgracing one's forebears, and among defilements, none is so great as castration. Any man who continues to live having suffered such a punishment is accounted as nothing. It is not just this age that has held this to be so, this has been the view since the distant past. Formerly Duke Ling of Wei rode in the same carriage as the eunuch Yongqu, Confucius departed Wei and moved to Chen. Shang Yang sought an audience in Qin by relying on the eunuch Jing and Zhao Liang's heart turned cold towards him. When Tongzi sat beside Emperor Wu in his carriage, Yuan Si blushed.⁵ Since ancient times eunuchs have occasioned shame. Even a man of middling abilities is invariably ill at ease when his affairs bring him into contact with a eunuch. How much more this is true of gentlemen of noble spirit! Though the court today may lack talented men, how could you ask a remnant from the knife's blade to stand as sponsor for men of outstanding valor?

It has been over twenty years since I assumed the yoke of service to carry forward my father's merit at court. My own view is this: First, I have not been able to accomplish great things through loyal devotion or great acts of faithfulness, not to earn a reputation for exceptional advice or talent in service to my enlightened lord. Second, I have not been able to make good the court's lapses or supply its wants, nor to attract worthy men or advance the able, nor to bring to light men of wisdom who have withdrawn to the cliffs and caves. And in foreign service too, I have been unable to win merit by serving in the ranks, attacking cities, or fighting in the field, beheading enemy commanders or capturing their banners. And even in the least of things I have no accomplishments, never rising to high office or salary through years of labor, bringing no glory or favor to family and friends. I have nothing to show in any of these four respects. You can see therefore how I have contributed nothing of value, merely bending to the general will and attempting to give no offense.

Formerly, when I held the rank of a lower grandee, I would sometimes participate in the minor deliberations of the outer court. But I did not then stand on principle or speak what was on my mind. So if now, as a mutilated slave sweeping the floors, a weed defiling the court, I should with earnest brow raise my head to set forth my views of truth and error, would this not be an insult to the court and to the gentlemen of this age? Oh, alas! What could there be for a man like me to say – what could there be?

⁵The affair of Yongqu (or Yongju) is told in the *Mencius* (5A.8). Zhao Liang was a Confucian courtier in Qin (*Shiji* 68). The biography of Yuan Si (or Yuan Ang) appears in *Shiji* 101.

How this all came to be is not easy to explain. As a youth I relied on my untutored abilities and upon coming of age I had earned no recognition from the people of my district. However, on account of my father's service I was so lucky as to have the emperor call upon me to contribute my shallow talents, allowing me to come and go within the palace precincts. I believed the old saying that one can't see the sky carrying a platter on one's head, so I broke off relations with friends and neglected family affairs, day and night devoting the weak force of my talents to my official duties, hoping to gain the confidence and approval of the emperor. But events did not unfold as I had planned. I committed an egregious error.

Li Ling and I were both officials in the palace, but we had had no opportunity to become friends. Our duties kept us busy in different offices and we had never so much as sipped a cup of wine together or enjoyed the slightest pleasure of friendship. But I observed that he conducted himself with extraordinary self-possession. He was filial towards his parents, trustworthy with his colleagues, scrupulously honest in matters of finance, upright in exchanges with others, deferential in matters of precedence, respectful, modest, and humble. His thoughts were always animated by selfless devotion to the needs of his country – this was his way, and I saw in him the very image of a statesman. A subject who dashes to the public's aid, risking ten thousand deaths without thought of his life as he rushes to his country's defense, such a man rises far above the ordinary. And so when, because of a single indiscretion, courtiers whose sole concern had been preserving themselves whole and protecting their wives and children seized on his mistake to brew disfavor against him, I felt pain for him in my innermost heart.

Now, the troops Li Ling led numbered fewer than 5,000. When they marched deep into the territory of the mounted nomads, they might as well have been marching straight into the Xiongnu court itself. It was like dangling bait in a tiger's mouth. They challenged the barbarian strength on all sides, facing an army of millions. For over ten days they fought the *shanyu*,⁶ killing more than their own number. The enemy had no time to bear off their dead or succor their wounded. Their pelt-clad leaders trembled in fear. But then the commanders of their left and right divisions sent out a call for every able archer, and all the tribes joined as one to attack Li Ling together, and they surrounded his troops. Yet Li Ling's army still fought on in retreat for a thousand *li*, until all their arrows were gone, their path was blocked, and the armies of relief had failed to arrive. By then the dead and wounded lay in heaps. And still, when Li Ling called out to rouse his army not a soldier failed to leap to the fight, wiping their tears over their bloodied faces. Stifling their sobs they brandished empty bows and braved naked blades, facing north and fighting the enemy to the death,

Before Li Ling had been beset a messenger had brought news of his progress to the court and all the ministers and lords had raised their cups and toasted him with cries of

⁶*Shanyu* was the Chinese rendering of the title given supreme leaders of the Xiongnu alliance.

“Long life!” When a few days later Li Ling’s report of his defeat arrived, the emperor lost all taste for food and interest in court; his high advisors were beset by fears, with no idea of what to do. Seeing my ruler so depressed and filled with regret, I lost sight of my own humble rank and my heart yearned to convey my frank thoughts to him. I felt that Li Ling had always been a man who led by giving up his own comforts and sharing what he had with those under his command, so that his men would fight for him to the death. Not even the famous generals of antiquity could surpass him. Although he had now fallen in defeat, his intent had clearly been to do the right thing and fulfill his duty to the Imperial House. There was nothing now that he could do, but the destruction that his troops had already wrought upon the enemy was plainly visible for the world to see.

I longed to set forth these ideas, but had no way to do so until it happened that I was summoned to give an opinion, and in just this way I spoke of Li Ling’s merits. My hope was to broaden my ruler’s perspective and block the words of jealous-eyed courtiers. But I was myself insufficiently clear and the emperor could not perceive my sense. He saw in my words a critique of General Li Guangli, who had led the relief brigade, and believing that I was speaking as a partisan of Li Ling he had me sent down for prosecution. Not all my earnest loyalty could justify myself to my inquisitors. I was convicted of attempting to delude my ruler and the sentence received imperial approval.

My family being poor, I was unable to raise funds to redeem my punishment. None of my friends came to my aid, none of my close colleagues spoke a word on my behalf. My body is not made of wood or stone. I was alone with my inquisitors, shut in the darkness of my cell. Whom could I appeal to? You have experienced this yourself, Shaoqing. How was it any different with me?

In surrendering alive Li Ling destroyed the reputation of his family. When I followed by submitting to the “silkworm chamber”⁷ I became a second laughingstock. Oh, such shame! This is not something I could ever bring myself to recount to an ordinary person.

My father never attained the tallies of court nobility that could protect his family, and my office of annalist and astrologer was not far in rank from those of the diviners and liturgists, mere amusements for the emperor, retained like singing girls and jesters, counting for nothing in the eyes of the world. If I had followed custom and submitted instead to execution, how would it have made a difference greater than the loss of a strand of hair from a herd of oxen or the life of a solitary ant? For no one would have ranked me with those who die out of loyalty to a code of principle; they would instead have believed that having exhausted my store of wisdom, branded a criminal offender, unable to find any way out of my predicament, I had simply let myself be led to slaughter. And why? Because of the station I had settled on in life.

⁷This refers to the room where castration was inflicted, warmed like silkworm breeding chambers because of the chilling shock to the body that the punishment prompted.

A man dies only once. His death may be a matter weighty as Mount Tai or light as a feather. It all depends on the reason for which he dies. The best of men die to avoid disgrace to their forbears; the next best to avoid disgrace to their persons; the next to avoid disgrace to their dignity; the next to avoid disgrace to their word. And then there are those who suffer the disgrace of being put in fetters; worse yet those disgraced by the prisoner's suit; worse yet those in shackles; worse yet those who are flogged; worse yet those who with shaven heads and iron chains around their necks; worse yet those who suffer amputations and mutilations. But the very worst disgrace of all is castration.

The texts say, "Corporal punishment does not extend to those holding the rank of grandee." This tells us that an officer cannot but be resolute in his integrity. When a fierce tiger roams deep in the mountains, all animals tremble in fear, but once he has fallen into captivity, through the gradual curtailment of his dignity he will come to wave his tail and beg for his food. Hence if you draw the outline of a jail on the ground, you cannot induce a man of resolve to step within it, and if you carve wood to the image of an inquisitor he will not address it, so set is his intent to have no such encounters. But cross his hands and feet to receive the shackles, bare his back to receive the whip, plunge him in the dark of the dungeon – now he sees his inquisitor and bows his face to the ground, sees the jail guards and gasps in terror. And why? It is the result of the gradual curtailment of his dignity. To have reached such a state and say there is in this no disgrace would be nothing but shamelessness, wholly unworthy of respect.

King Wen of Zhou was an earl of the Shang state when he was imprisoned in Youli.⁸ Li Si was a prime minister and yet he was subjected to all five corporal punishments.⁹ Han Xin held the title of King of Huaiyin under the Han emperor, yet he was put in the stocks in Chen, and Peng Yue and Zhang Ao too faced south and held court as kings, yet the one was bound in prison and the other put to death.¹⁰ Lord Jiang had all the Lü clan executed – his power surpassed the Five Hegemons of old – but later he was mewed up in the prosecutor's jail.¹¹ The Lord of Weiqi was a great general, yet he had to don the convict's scarlet gown and wear the wooden shackles. Ji Bu spent a term as the slave of the Zhu family, and Guan Fu was disgraced in prison.¹²

⁸An instance of the Shang king Zhòu's many crimes against worthy ministers, leading to the Zhou rebellion (*Shiji* 4).

⁹Li Si's fall from power at the close of the Qin is said to have led to the sentence of "death to the third degree of clan" (*Shiji* 87), a gruesome sentence, entailing the gamut of Qin punishments: tattooing, amputations, flaying, and dismemberment.

¹⁰These men were all kings of early Han feudatories, provoked to rebellion by the policies of Liu Bang, whom they or their families had helped to bring to the imperial throne. Han Xin's biography appears in *Shiji* 92; Peng Yue's is found in *Shiji* 90; Zhang Ao's tale appears in the biography of his father, Zhang Er, in *Shiji* 89.

¹¹Lord Jiang (Zhou Bo) led the high ministers who foiled the Lü family coup attempt in 180 BCE. (*Shiji* 57).

¹²The Lord of Weiqi (Dou Ying) was a relative of Empress Dou. He and his close friend, General Guan Fu, were both executed on orders of Wu-di after their enmity towards the emperor's cousin, the prime minister, became an issue. (*Shiji* 107) Ji Bu was a warrior in the service of Xiang Yu; Liu Bang put a price on his head when the Han was founded and Ji lived in disguise as a slave of the Zhu clan before ultimately receiving a pardon. (*Shiji* 100)

These men had all risen to the ranks of kings and lords, generals and prime ministers, and their fame spread from state to state. But once they fell into the nets of the law they lacked the resolution to put an end to themselves – it has always been so, then and now: in such cases, how can disgrace be avoided? From this we can see that valor and cowardice are matters of circumstance, strength and weakness depend on conditions.

This being understood, the conduct of these men is nothing to wonder at. Once having failed to do away with themselves before falling into the clutches of the law, and having then been worn down by degrees between the whip and the bastinado, committing suicide on principle had moved far beyond their reach. This is surely why the ancients viewed corporal punishment for men of grandee rank as excessive.

By nature, no man will fail to cling to life and avoid death, be concerned for the welfare of his parents, and look after and protect his wife and children. When a man who is passionate about righteousness acts contrary to it, it is due to the force of such inescapable dispositions. Now, I had the misfortune to lose my father and mother early. I have no brothers and so stand alone, without such family – and you can see, can't you, Shaoqing, how little I had attended to the good of my wife and children in speaking out.

But if a brave man will not always die for a code of principle, so too a coward may find great resolve if what is right is dear to him. Though I may be a coward who could cling to life by self-serving conduct, surely I know the difference between flagrant right and wrong. How could I have plunged myself into the ignominy of being tied and bound? Even a captive slave-girl is capable of putting an end to herself, and surely I could have done so as well, had it been the inescapably correct path. The reason why I bore the intolerable and clung to my life, refusing to release myself from the filth into which I had been cast, was the remorse I felt at the prospect of leaving the achievement dearest my heart incomplete, quitting the world like a vulgar nonentity with the written emblem of my lifework unrevealed to posterity.

The names of past men of wealth and rank forgotten today are beyond calculation; only the most outstanding and exceptional are still spoken today. It was likely as a prisoner that King Wen composed his expansion of the *Yijing*, and Confucius edited the *Spring and Autumn Annals* when he was in desperate straits.¹³ Only when Qu Yuan was banished did he compose “Encountering Sorrow”; it was after Zuo Qiu lost his sight that he compiled *The Discourses of the States*, and Sunzi wrote *The Art of War* after suffering the amputation of his

¹³King Wen's imprisonment in Youli is referred to above, and tradition associated his reputed work on the *Yijing* to this time. During his years of travel in exile from Lu, Confucius is said to have encountered times of danger and impoverishment; however, these accounts, including the *Shiji* narrative of Confucius's life (ch. 47), do not associate these incidents with his editing of the *Annals*.

feet.¹⁴ Lü Buwei was removed to Shu and so the generations pass on his *Almanac*; Han Feizi was imprisoned in Qin and so we have his “Difficulties of Persuasion” and “Solitary Frustration” – and surely too most of the three hundred odes of *The Book of Poetry* were composed by sagely men giving voice to their frustrations.¹⁵ These men all found their aspirations stifled, the paths they sought to travel blocked, and they spoke to future generations by telling the tales of the past. Or in the cases of Zuo Qiu losing his eyes and Sunzi his legs, they had no roles left to play and so they retreated to the world of books to give vent to their frustrations, hoping to hoist themselves into the world’s view through their unsponsored writings.

And I have forborne to follow the approved course. I have instead in recent years relied on my unskilled words to gather together scattered fragments of ancient lore. Probing into the events behind them, connecting their narrative flow, scrutinizing the regularities governing victory and defeat, flourishing and decay, tracing back to the Yellow Emperor and following down to our time, I have composed ten historical tables, twelve royal annals, eight monographs, thirty genealogies of noble houses, seventy biographical accounts: 130 chapter in all. I have sought, through examination of the interface of Heaven and man, and comprehension of change from past through present to found a new tradition of philosophy.

But then, before my rough draft was complete this disaster overtook me! It was my anxiety for my unfinished work that led me to submit to the worst of all punishments with no outward show of the bitterness within me. And now with all my heart I shall take this book that I have written and hide it within the Mountain of Fame, that it may find its way into the hands of the man who will understand it, and then on throughout the great cities and crossroads of the world.¹⁶ Then I will have redeemed my shame. Though I were punished with myriads of deaths, what regret could I feel?

But while all of this is so, these are things I can confide only to a man of insight, it would not do to relate them to ordinary men. Under the weight of criminal sentence it is difficult enough to conduct oneself well, and the gossips of the world are full of slander. My misfortune came about entirely from my speaking out, and were I further to besmirch the reputations of my forbears by once again drawing the laughter of every village neighborhood, how could I ever again have the face to visit the graves of my parents? Even after a hundred generations, the stain would only sink deeper. This is what burns in my gut over and over,

¹⁴“Encountering Sorrow” is collected in the *Lyrics of Chu*, the greater part of which is attributed to the Chu minister Qu Yuan, who ran afoul of his king and was dismissed from court. Zuo Qiu (usually Zuo Qiuming) is the reputed author of the *Zuozhuan*, which is probably the work denoted as *Discourses* here. The theme of blindness may reflect a confusion between the historian Zuo and another man of a similar name. Sunzi refers to Sun Bin, whose tale is told in *Shiji* 62. His ancestor, Sun Wu, is the author of the more famous *Art of War*.

¹⁵Shu was the location of Lü Buwei’s fief, where he dwelt with his scholar-retainers after falling afoul of the Qin court (*Shiji* 85; see reading 2.2). The text referred to is *The Almanac of Lord Lü*. Han Feizi’s imprisonment and death in Qin are recounted in *Shiji* 63. The texts noted here are chapters in the *Han Feizi*.

¹⁶The Mountain of Fame was the chief archive of the Han government.

day after day. At home I feel dazed, as though seeking something lost, and abroad I lose track of where I am going. Every time I think of this shame, sweat never fails to spring from my body and drench the clothes on my back. I am fit only to be a lackey guarding the harem, or better yet to hide myself deep within a cliffside cave. And yet for now I follow along with the daily flow as best I can, bending and bowing as circumstances demand, making my way through a world of erratic confusion.

Now, Shaoqing, you urge me to recommend worthy men for advancement. How far this lies from what I feel in my heart. Even if I tried to embellish my figure with erudite phrasing and pleasing words it would be useless in the face of my discredit in the eyes of society, an invitation to further disgrace. The fact is that I can only hope to be justly viewed after I am dead.

In this letter I have not been able fully to convey what is in my mind, but I have tried to lay forth a crude outline, ill expressed as it has been.

With deep respect, I bow to you.

(Han shu 67.2725-36)

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