

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 *Shi-ji*, 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 *Shi-ji*, 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 Zhong-shu, 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 *Shi-ji* 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

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

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!

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 *Shi-ji*.

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 Xiong-nu, 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 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 *Shi-ji* was substantially complete.

The principles of composition of the Shi-ji

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 *Zuo-zhuan*, which was at this time unknown in China. Sima Qian probably unearthed the base texts of the *Zuo-zhuan* 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 Lao -zi, 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 *Feng-shan* 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 *Shi-ji* 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 *feng-shan* 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 Zhong-shu.

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 Peng-cheng. 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 Shao-qing) 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. The letter is the earliest piece of sustained biographical writing that we possess from China (Sima Qian's *Shi-ji* autobiography is far less revealing).

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, in the translation of James Hightower. I have not glossed its many allusions; you are by now familiar with the way in which history was interwoven in all elite discourse, and the spirit of the letter is clear as it stands.

Sima Qian's Letter to Ren An (Shao-qing)

The Grand Historian Sima Qian, bowing repeatedly, addresses his worthy friend Shao-qing:

Some time ago you deigned to send me a letter in which you advised me to be concerned for my social contacts and devote myself to the recommendation and advancement of qualified persons. You expressed yourself with considerable vigor, as though you expected I would not follow your advice but would be influenced by the words of the vulgar: I would hardly behave in such a way. I may be a broken hack, but I have still been exposed to the teachings handed down by my elders. However, I see myself as mutilated and disgraced: I am criticized if I act, and where I hope to be helpful I do harm instead. This causes me secret distress, but to whom can I unburden myself? As the proverb says, "For whom do you do it? Who are you going to get to listen to you?" Why was it that Bo-ya never again played his lute after Zhong Zi-qi died? A gentleman acts on behalf of an

understanding friend, as a woman makes herself beautiful for her lover. Someone like me whose virility is lacking could never be a hero, even if he had the endowments of the pearl of Sui and the jade of Pien-ho or conducted himself like Xu You and Bo Yi; he would only succeed in being laughed at and put to shame.

I should have answered your letter sooner, but when I got back from the East in the emperor's suite I was very busy. We were seldom together, and then I was so pressed that there was never a moment's time when I could speak my mind. Now you, Shao-qing, are under an accusation whose outcome is uncertain. Weeks and month have passed until we have now reached the end of winter, and I am going to have to accompany the emperor to Yong. I am afraid that may come to pass which cannot be avoided, and as a result I will never have the chance to give expression to my grievance and explain myself to you. It would mean that the souls of the departed would carry a never-ending burden of secret resentment. Let me say what is on my mind; I hope you will not hold it against me that I have been negligent in leaving your letter so long unanswered.

I have been taught that self-cultivation is the mark of wisdom, that charity is the sign of humanity, that taking and giving is the measure of decency, that a sense of shame is the index of bravery, that making a name for oneself is the end of conduct. A gentleman who practices these five things can entrust his reputation to the world and win a place among outstanding men. On the other hand there is no misfortune so hurtful as cupidity, no grief so painful as disappointment, no conduct so despicable as disgracing one's forebears, no defilement so great as castration. One who has undergone that punishment nowhere counts as a man. This is not just a modern attitude; it has always been so. Formerly when Duke Ling of Wei rode in the same chariot with the eunuch Yong-ju, Confucius left Wei to go to Chen; when Tong-zi shared the emperor's chariot, Yuan Si blushed. It has always been occasion for shame. Even an ordinary fellow never fails to be offended when he has business with a eunuch – how much the more a gentleman of spirit. Though the court today may want men, you surely do not expect one who has submitted to the knife to recommend the worthies of the empire for places?

It has been twenty years since I inherited my father's office and entered the service of the emperor. It occurs to me that during that time I have not been able to demonstrate my loyalty and sincerity or win praise for good advice

and outstanding abilities in the service of a wise ruler; nor have I been able to make good defects and omissions, or advance the worthy and talented, or induce wise hermits to serve; nor have I been able to serve in the ranks of the army, attacking walled cities and fighting in the field to win merit by taking an enemy general's head or capturing his banners; nor have I been able to win merit through long and faithful service to rise to high office and handsome salary, to the glory of my family and the benefit of my friends. From my failure in all four of these endeavors it follows that I am prepared to compromise with the times and avoid giving offence, wholly ineffectual for good or ill.

Formerly, as Great Officer of the third grade, I once had the chance to participate in deliberations in a minor capacity. Since I then offered no great plans nor expressed myself freely, would it not be an insult to the court and an affront to my colleagues if now, mutilated, a menial who sweeps floors, a miserable wretch, I should raise my head and stretch my eyebrows to argue right and wrong? Alas, for one like me what is there left to say? What is there left to say?

It is not easy to explain just what happened. When I was young I had no outstanding abilities and I grew up unpraised by my fellow townsmen. Fortunately, however, thanks to my father's service, the emperor made it possible for me to put my inconsiderable abilities at his disposal, and I had access to the court. It seemed to me that one cannot get a good view of the sky carrying a platter on one's head, so I broke off relations with my friends and neglected my family affairs that I might day and night devote all my small abilities wholeheartedly to my official duties and so gain the liking and approval of the ruler. But then came the event when I made my big mistake and everything was changed.

Li Ling and I were both stationed in the palace, but we never had a chance to become friends. Our duties kept us apart; we never shared so much as a cup of wine, let alone enjoyed a closer friendship. But I observed that he conducted himself as no ordinary gentleman. He was filial toward his parents, honest with his colleagues, scrupulous about money, decent in his behavior, yielding in matters of precedence, respectful, moderate, and polite to others. Carried away by his enthusiasm he never thought of himself but was ever there where his country needed him: such was his constant concern. To me he seemed to have the bearing of a national hero. A subject who exposes himself

to a thousand death without regard for his own single life, and rushes to the defense of his country--that is a great man. That men who had been solely concerned with keeping themselves and their wives and children safe and sound should go out of their way to stir up trouble for him when he had made a single mistake was something that really pained my inmost feelings.

Moreover Li Ling's troops numbered fewer than 5000 when he led them deep into the territory of the nomads. They marched to the khan's court and dangled the bait in the tiger's mouth. They boldly challenged the fierce barbarians, in the face of an army of a million. For ten days running they fought the khan, killing more than their own number, so that the enemy were unable to retrieve their dead or rescue their wounded. The princes of felts and furs were all terror-stricken; they called on the neighboring lords to draft bowmen, and the whole nation joined the attack and surround Li Ling's troops. For a thousand miles they retreated, fighting as they went, until their arrows were exhausted and the road cut off. The relieving force had not arrived. Dead and wounded lay in heaps. But when Li Ling rallied his men with a cry, his soldiers rose to fight, with streaming tears and bloody faces. They swallowed their tears and brandishing their empty bows braved naked swords. Facing north they fought to the death with the enemy.

Before Li Ling had reached this extremity a messenger brought news to the court and all the lords and princes raised their cups to drink to his success. Some days later the message arrived announcing that he had been defeated. The news so affected the emperor that he found his food tasteless and took no pleasure in holding court. The great ministers were depressed and fearful, not knowing what course to take. When I saw the emperor in great distress of mind, I took no count of my own humble position, but wished to express my honest opinion: that Li Ling had always shared with his men, renouncing the sweet and dividing his short rations, so that he was able to get them to die for him--no famous general of antiquity surpassed him in this. And though he was now involved in defeat, it could be assumed that he intended to do what was right and make good his obligation to China. The situation was past remedying, but the losses he had already inflicted on the Xiong-nu were such that his renown filled the empire.

I wished to express these ideas but had no way to do so until by chance I was ordered to give an opinion. In these terms I extolled Li Ling's merits, hoping to get the emperor to take a wider view of things and at the same time

to undo the charges of his enemies. I did not succeed in making myself clear, and the emperor, in his wisdom, did not understand, suspecting that I was criticizing the Second General Li Guang-li, who headed the relief column, and that I was indulging in special pleading in behalf of Li Ling. As a result I was turned over to the judges, and despite all my heartfelt sincerity I was unable to justify myself. In the end it was decided that I was guilty of attempting to mislead the emperor.

Being poor, I had insufficient funds to pay a fine in lieu of punishment. None of my friends came to my aid. My colleagues and associates spoke not a word on my behalf. My body is not of wood or stone. I was alone with my jailers. When one is shut up in the depth of prison is there anyone he can appeal to? You have experienced this yourself, do you think it was otherwise with me?

In giving himself up alive to the Xiong-nu, Li Ling disgraced his family; in going to the "silkworm chamber" after his act I became doubly the laughingstock of the empire. Alas, alas! This is not a thing one can easily talk about to the vulgar. My father never earned tally and patent of nobility; as annalist and astrologer I was not far removed from the diviners and liturgists, truly the plaything of the emperor, kept like any singing girl or jester, and despised by the world. Had I chosen to submit to the law and let myself be put to death, it would have been no more important than the loss of a single hair from nine oxen, no different from the crushing of an ant. No one would have credited me with dying for a principle; rather they would have thought that I had simply died because I was at my wit's end and my offence allowed no other way out. And why? They would think so because of the occupation in which I established myself.

A man can die only once, and whether death to him is as weighty as Mount Tai or as light as a feather depends on the reason for which he dies. The most important thing is not to disgrace one's ancestors, the next is not to disgrace one's self, the next not to disgrace one's principles, the next not to disgrace one's manners. Next worse is the disgrace of being put in fetters, the next is to wear a prisoner's garb, the next is to be beaten in the stocks, the next is to have the head shaved and a metal chain fastened around the neck, the next is mutilation, and the very worst disgrace of all is castration. It is said that corporal punishments are not applied to the great officers, implying that an officer cannot but be careful of his integrity. When the fierce tiger is in the

depth of the mountain, all animals hold him in fear, but when he falls into a trap he waves his tail and begs for food: this is the end result of curtailing his dignity. Hence if you draw the plan of a jail on the ground, a gentleman will not step inside the figure, nor will he address even the wooden image of a jailor. In this way he shows his determination never to find himself in such a position. But let him cross his hands and feet to receive the bonds, expose his back to receive the whip, and be incarcerated in the barred cell--by then when he sees the jailor he bows his head to the ground and at the sight of his underlings he pants in terror. And why? It is the result of the gradual curtailment of his dignity. If now he claims there has been no disgrace, he is devoid of a sense of shame and wholly unworthy of respect.

King Wen was an earl when he was held prisoner in You-li; Li Si was prime minister and yet was visited with all five punishments; Han Xin was a prince and yet he was put in the stocks in Chen; Peng Yue and Zhang Ao each sat on a throne and called himself king, and yet the one was fettered in prison, the other put to death. These were all men of high rank and office and widespread reputation, but when they got into trouble with the law they were unable resolutely to put an end to themselves. It has always been the same: when one lies in the dirt there is no question of his not being disgraced. In the light of these examples, bravery and cowardice are a matter of circumstance, strength and weakness depend on conditions. Once this is understood, there is nothing to be surprised at in their behavior. If by failing to do away with himself before he is in the clutches of the law a man is degraded to the point of being flogged and then wishes to rescue his honor, has he not missed his chance? This is no doubt why the ancients were chary of applying corporal punishment to a great officer.

Now there is no man who does not naturally cling to life and avoid death, love his parents and cherish his wife and children. But the man who is devoted to the right sometimes has no choice but to behave otherwise. I early had the misfortune to lose my father and mother; I had no brothers and was quite alone. You have seen how little my affection for my wife and children deterred me from speaking out. But a brave man will not always die for his honor, and what efforts will not even a coward make in a cause to which he is devoted? I may be a coward and wish to live at the expense of my honor, but I surely know how to act appropriately. Would I have abandoned myself to the ignominy of being tied and bound? Even a miserable slave-girl is capable of putting an end to herself; could you expect less of me, when I had so little

choice? If I concealed my feelings and clung to life, burying myself in filth without protest, it was because I could not bear to leave unfinished my deeply cherished project, because I rejected the idea of dying without leaving to posterity my literary work.

In the past there have been innumerable men of wealth and rank whose names died with them; only the outstanding and unusual are known today. It was when King Wen was in prison that he expanded the *Yi jing*; when Confucius was in straits he wrote the *Spring and Autumn Annals*; when Qu Yuan was banished he composed “Encountering Sorrow”; Zuo Qiu without sight and Sun-zi with amputated feet were permanently disabled. They retired to write books in which they expressed their pent-up feelings, hoping to realize themselves in literature, since action was denied them.

I have ventured not to look for more recent models, but with what little literary ability I possess I have brought together the scattered fragments of ancient lore. I studied the events of history and set them down in significant order; I have written 130 chapters in which appears the record of the past--its periods of greatness and decline, of achievement and failure. Further it was my hope, by a thorough comprehension of the workings of affairs divine and human, and a knowledge of the historical process, to create a philosophy of my own. Before my draft was complete this disaster overtook me. It was my concern over my unfinished work that made me submit to the worst of all punishments without showing the rage I felt. When at last I shall have finished my book, I shall store it away in the archives to await the man who will understand it. When it finally becomes known in the world, I shall have paid the debt of my shame; nor will I regret a thousand death.

However, this is something I can confide only to a person of intelligence; it would not do to speak of it to the vulgar crowd. When one is in a compromising situation, it is not easy to justify oneself; the world is always ready to misrepresent one's motives. It was in consequence of my speaking out that I met disaster in the first place; were I to make myself doubly a laughingstock in my native place, to the disgrace of my forebears, how could I ever have the face again to visit the grave of my father and my mother? Even after a hundred generations my shame will but be the more. This is what makes my bowels burn within me nine times a day, so that at home I sit in a daze and lost, abroad I know not where I am going. Whenever I think of this shame the sweat drenches the clothes on my back. I am fit only to be a slave

guarding the women's apartments: better that I should hide away in the farthest depth of the mountains. Instead I go on as best I can, putting up with whatever treatment is meted out to me, and so complete my degradation.

And now you want me to recommend worthy men for advancement! Is this not rather the last thing in the world I would want to do? Even if I should want to deck myself out with fine words and elegant phrases, it would not help me any against the world's incredulity; it would only bring more shame on me. In short, I can hope for justification only after my death.

In a letter I cannot say everything. What I have written is a crude and general statement of my feelings.

Respectfully, I bow to you.

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