

# Introduction to “The Records of the Grand Historian”

## “Sima Qian: The Sacred Duty of the Historian”

De, B. W. T., Bloom, I., Chan, W., Adler, J., & Lufrano, R. J. (2000). *Sources of Chinese tradition Volume 1*. (2nd Ed.). New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 368-372.

## Chapter 12

## THE GREAT HAN HISTORIANS

The intellectual and literary glory of the Han found its highest expression in two great histories of the period, the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*) and the *History of the Former Han* (*Hanshu*). Few works outside the classics themselves have been so much admired, studied, and often in part committed to memory by the Chinese. They set the pattern for all later Chinese histories, establishing a precedent that was responsible for giving to the Chinese the most complete and unbroken record of their past possessed by any people.

From very early times the Chinese seem to have possessed an extraordinary love and respect for history. According to tradition, even the earliest dynasties had their official historians, who were closely associated with astronomical affairs and divination. They were also responsible for acting as mentors to the rulers, instructing them in the lessons of the past, and recording their deeds for the judgment of posterity. Confucianism, with its humanistic emphasis, did much to encourage and develop this sense of history and feeling for the past. Two of the five Confucian Classics, the *Classic of Documents* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, traditionally believed to have been compiled and edited by Confucius, are historical works, and the appeal to past example has always been among the principle techniques of Confucian instruction and argumentation.

The *History of the Former Han Dynasty* says of these two historical classics: "The *Classic of Documents* broadens one's information and is the practice of

wisdom; the *Spring and Autumn Annals* passes moral judgments on events and is the symbol of trustworthiness."<sup>1</sup>

The function of history, as seen in this statement, is twofold: to impart tradition and to provide edifying moral examples as embodied in the classics. These two traditions, one recording the words and deeds of history, the other illustrating moral principles through historical incidents, run through all Chinese historiography. In practice, the former tradition has dominated. The common method of the Chinese historian has been to transmit verbatim as nearly as possible what his sources tell him, adding only such background and connecting narrative as may be necessary. For example, the historian does not tell us that the emperor issued an edict to such and such an effect but reproduces the edict whole or in part so that we may read what he said for ourselves. Since the Chinese historian was often working in an official capacity, he had access to government files of memorials, edicts, court decisions, and other papers that made such a procedure possible. His own job, then, became one of selecting the most pertinent documents and arranging them in a way best calculated to demonstrate the cause and effect of events. If in addition he wished to inject his own personal opinion, he usually marked it clearly by some conventional literary device so that the reader could readily distinguish it.

The tradition of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the didactic function of history, was by no means forgotten. Only a sage might dare actually to record moral judgments in his writing, as Confucius was supposed to have done in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. But all literate people were expected to study the histories of the past carefully and thoughtfully to deduce for themselves the moral lessons embodied there, to descry the pattern hidden beneath the succession of recorded events. For, like all the rest of creation, history was thought to manifest an underlying order and process. Han scholars, influenced by yin-yang and Five Phases theories, conceived of history as a cyclical succession of eras proceeding in a fixed order. Not only this succession but all of history was a manifestation of the universal process of birth, growth, decay, and rebirth, constantly coming to realization in the course of human events. Thus, for the Confucian scholar, the proper study of humankind is human life as revealed in the pages of history.

## THE RECORDS OF THE GRAND HISTORIAN

During the Zhou, numerous chronicles and works of history were compiled by the various states and schools of philosophy. But not until the Han, when the Chinese acquired a new sense of cultural unity, was there any evidence of an

1. *Hanshu* 30:12b.

attempt to produce a comprehensive history of the entire past. The *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)* was begun by Sima Tan (d. 110 B.C.E.), Grand Historian under Emperor Wu, and carried on and brought to completion by his son, Sima Qian (145?–86? B.C.E.), who succeeded to his father's position. Comprising 130 chapters, it covers the history of the Chinese people from the Yellow Emperor to the time of the historians.

Sima Qian divided his material into five sections: "Basic Annals," "Chronological Tables," "Treatises," "Hereditary Houses," and "Memoirs." This arrangement, with various modifications, has been followed by almost all later official historians. In later histories the section called "Basic Annals" might better be referred to as "Imperial Annals," since it deals only with acts of the officially reigning emperors. Sima Qian, however, did not so confine himself but included here the account of Xiang Yu, who, though not officially emperor, in actuality ruled the country for a time. The "Chronological Tables" needs little explanation, being tables of dates for important events. The "Treatises," one of the most valuable parts of the work, comprises essays devoted to the history and description of important institutional matters and topical subjects. Below are listed the eight Treatises of the *Shiji* together with those of the *Hanshu* that were based upon *Shiji* material.

#### *Shiji* Treatises

Rites  
Music  
The Pitch Pipes  
The Calendar  
Astronomy  
Sacrifices of Feng and Shan<sup>2</sup>  
The Yellow River and Canals  
Balance of Commerce (Economics)

#### *Hanshu* Treatises

The Calendar  
Rites and Music  
Punishments and Laws  
Food and Money (Economics)  
State Sacrifices  
Astronomy  
Five Phases (Portents)  
Geography  
Land Drainage  
Literature

"Hereditary Houses," being largely accounts of feudal families, was not usually included after the abolition of the enfeoffment system. The "Memoirs" section was generally devoted to the lives of famous persons — military leaders, politicians, philosophers, and so on. Some chapters deal with particular groups such as famous assassins, upright officials, tyrannical officials, wandering knights, imperial favorites, and merchants. Others treat non-Chinese lands and people,

2. The Feng and Shan were sacrifices of the greatest solemnity, performed by the emperor at the sacred Mount Tai and addressed to Heaven and Earth respectively.

including those of Korea, southeast China, and Ferghana. The concluding chapter is the biography of the historians themselves.

#### SIMA QIAN: THE SACRED DUTY OF THE HISTORIAN

The following excerpt from the autobiography of Sima Qian relates the words of Sima Tan to his son as he lay dying.

The Grand Historian [Sima Tan] grasped my hand and said, weeping, "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 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 our ancestors. . . . When you become Grand Historian, you must not forget what I have desired to expound and write. Now, filial piety begins with the serving of your parents; next, you must serve your sovereign; and, finally, you must make something of yourself, that your name may go down through the ages to the glory of your father and mother. This is the most important part of filial piety. Everyone praises the Duke of Zhou, saying that he was able to expound in word and song the virtues of King Wen and King Wu, publishing abroad the odes of Zhou and Shao; he set forth the thoughts and ideals of Taiwang and Wang Ji, extending his words back to King Liu and paying honor to Hou Ji [ancestors of the Zhou dynasty]. After the reigns of Yu and Li the way of the ancient kings fell into disuse and rites and music declined. Confucius revived the old ways and restored what had been abandoned, expounding the *Odes* and *Documents* and making the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. From that time until today men of learning have taken these as their models. It has now been over four hundred years since the capture of the unicorn [481 B.C.E.]. The various feudal states have merged together, and the old records and chronicles have become scattered and lost. Now 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 ready to die for duty. I am fearful that the historical material will be neglected and lost. You must remember and think of this!"

I bowed my head and wept, saying, "I, your son, am ignorant and unworthy, but I shall endeavor to set forth in full the reports of antiquity that have come down from our ancestors. I dare not be remiss!" . . . [130:8a–b]

[Now] I have sought out and gathered together the ancient traditions of the empire that were scattered and lost. Of the great deeds of kings I have searched the beginnings and examined the ends; I have seen their times of prosperity and observed their decline. Of the affairs that I have discussed and examined,

I have made a general survey of the Three Dynasties and a record of the Qin and Han, extending back as far as Xian Yuan [the Yellow Emperor] and, coming down to the present, set forth in twelve Basic Annals. After this had been put in order and completed, because there were differences in chronology for the same periods and the dates were not always clear, I made the ten Chronological Tables. Of the changes of rites and music, the improvements and revisions of the pitch pipes and calendar, military power, mountains and rivers, spirits and gods, the relationships between Heaven and the human, the economic practices handed down and changed age by age, I have made the eight Treatises. As the twenty-eight constellations revolve about the North Star, as the thirty spokes of a wheel come together at the hub, revolving endlessly without stop, so the ministers, assisting like arms and legs, faithful and trustworthy, in true moral spirit serve their lord and ruler: of them I made the thirty Hereditary Houses. Upholding duty, masterful and sure, not allowing themselves to miss their opportunities, they made a name for themselves in the world: of such men I made the seventy Memoirs. In all 130 chapters, 526,500 words, this is the book of the Grand Historian, compiled in order to repair omissions and amplify the Six Disciplines. It is the work of one family, designed to supplement the various interpretations of the Six Classics and to put into order the miscellaneous sayings of the hundred schools. [30b-32a]

[From *Shiji* (BNB) 130:8a-b, 30b-32a — BW]

In 98 B.C.E., because he dared to speak out in defense of a military leader whom Emperor Wu and the rest of the court believed had disgraced himself, Sima Qian was condemned to suffer the punishment of castration. The following excerpt is from a famous letter that the historian wrote to a friend relating the circumstances of his disgrace and explaining why it was he chose to suffer the ignominy of castration rather than commit suicide. He consoles himself with the memory of the great men of the past who, in the midst of misfortune, produced writings that have guaranteed their everlasting fame, as he believes his history will do for him.

My father had no great deeds that entitled him to receive territories or privileges from the emperor. He dealt with affairs of astronomy and the calendar, which are close to divination and the worship of the spirits. He was kept for the sport and amusement of the emperor, treated the same as the musicians and jesters, and made light of by the vulgar men of his day. If I fell before the law and were executed, it would make no more difference to most people than one hair off nine oxen, for I was nothing but a mere ant to them. The world would not rank me among those men who were able to die for their ideals, but would believe simply that my wisdom was exhausted and my crime great, that I had been unable to escape penalty and in the end had gone to my death. Why? Because all my past actions had brought this on me, they would say.

A man has only one death. That death may be as weighty as Mount Tai, or

it may be as light as a goose feather. It all depends upon the way he uses it. . . . It is the nature of every man to love life and hate death, to think of his relatives and look after his wife and children. Only when a man is moved by higher principles is this not so. Then there are things that he must do. . . . The brave man does not always die for honor, while even the coward may fulfill his duty. Each takes a different way to exert himself. Though I might be weak and cowardly and seek shamefully to prolong my life, yet I know full well the difference between what ought to be followed and what rejected. How could I bring myself to sink into the shame of ropes and bonds? If even the lowest slave and scullery maid can bear to commit suicide, why should not one like myself be able to do what has to be done? But the reason I have not refused to bear these ills and have continued to live, dwelling among this filth, is that I grieve that I have things in my heart that I have not been able to express fully, and I am shamed to think that after I am gone my writings will not be known to posterity.

Too numerous to record are the men of ancient times who were rich and noble and whose names have yet vanished away. It is only those who were masterful and sure, the truly extraordinary men, who are still remembered. When the Earl of the West was imprisoned at Youli, he expanded the *Changes*; Confucius was in distress and he made the *Spring and Autumn Annals*; Qu Yuan was banished and he composed his poem "Encountering Sorrow"; after Zuo Qiu lost his sight he composed the *Narratives of the States*; when Sunzi had had his feet amputated he set forth the *Art of War*; Lü Buwei was banished to Shu but his *Lülan* (*Lüshi chunqiu*) has been handed down through the ages; while Han Feizi was held prisoner in Qin he wrote "The Difficulties of Disputation" and "The Sorrow of Standing Alone"; most of the three hundred poems of the *Book of Odes* were written when the sages poured forth their anger and dissatisfaction. All these men had a rankling in their hearts, for they were not able to accomplish what they wished. Therefore they wrote of past affairs in order to pass on their thoughts to future generations. . . .

I too have ventured not to be modest but have entrusted myself to my useless writings. I have gathered up and brought together the old traditions of the world that were scattered and lost. I have examined the deeds and events of the past and investigated the principles behind their success and failure, their rise and decay, in 130 chapters. I wished to examine into all that concerns Heaven and the human, to penetrate the changes of the past and present, completing all as the work of one family. But before I had finished my rough manuscript, I met with this calamity. It is because I regretted that it had not been completed that I submitted to the extreme penalty without rancor. When I have truly completed this work, I shall deposit it in some safe place. If it may be handed down to men who will appreciate it and penetrate to the villages and great cities, then, though I should suffer a thousand mutilations, what regret would I have?

[From *Hanshu* (BNB) 62:17b-21b — BW]