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Humanism in Traditional Chinese Historiography
—With Special Reference to the Grand Historian
Sima Qian
司馬遷與中國人文主義史學傳統

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Abstract

The grand historian Sima Qian (135-93 BCE) and his monumental work *Records of the Historian (Shiji)* laid down the foundation of the traditional Chinese historical writing. He not only set the example of the biographical style of historical writing but also set the tone for humanist proclivity for later historians. This paper explores the grand historian's vision of history in writing, in which men rather than events stand at the center of discourse. As well, in his work, men rather than gods retain the most prominent position. What he tried to reveal is the secret of history through men. The grand historian pronounced that human will rather than divine influence had determined the rise or fall of a state. He made it very clear that men created history, and history was humanist. His historical narration amply demonstrates his unshakable belief in the value of man. The grand historian's biographical approach and humanist proclivity, in short, had shaped and influenced traditional Chinese historiography almost without interruption until to the modern time.

摘要

太史公司馬遷著《史記》奠定中國傳統史學的基礎，他不僅開創了紀傳體，而且建立了人文主義的史學傳統。本文探討太史公以人為中心的史學論述，在《史記》一書中，人而不是神佔據最主要的位置，欲通過人來展示歷史之秘。司馬遷強調人力而非神道決定盛衰，並清楚表達人在創造歷史，因而歷史是人文的，他對人之價值不可動搖的信念充分表達在其歷史書寫之中。總之，司馬遷的紀傳體及其人文傾向無間斷地形塑了中國傳統史學，直到近代。

I. Introduction

In the West, humanism was the Renaissance rediscovery of, or reborn from, classical ideas and learning, especially the humane studies, as opposed to theology.¹ Renaissance humanism thus turned man's eyes from Heaven back to earth. In China, humanism is deep-rooted in her cultural tradition. Archaeological evidence shows that ancestral worship appeared prominent in religious belief early during the Neolithic China. By late Neolithic period worshipping ancestor became the supreme ceremony of tribal clans at the time. At the beginning of Chinese history, Shang and Zhou, the patriarchal clan system was in shape. Zhou's royal family, together with noble clans of various sort, when worshipping ancestors, the descendants, son or grandson, played the "body" (*shi* 尸) of the dead ancestor when receiving worshipping and sacrifices. There were interactions between those who gave sacrificial offerings and the receiver. As the research of late Professor Ping-ti Ho 何炳棣 (1917-2012) shows, no religion in history is as humanistic as ancient China. No one, indeed, could discuss Zhou religion without mentioning the ancestral temple system of the ruling house. During the classical Zhou China, in fact, virtually everything, including religious, political, and social institutions, was rested on patriarchal clan system. Here came the "Son of Heaven" to ascertain the Zhou system. The king represented the "grand clan" (*dazong* 大宗) to receive the absolute loyalty from various "small clans" (*xiaozong* 小宗). By the same token, a feudal lord was his own "grand clan" in relation to his loyal "small clans." The evolution of this kinship based patriarchal clan system as well as ancestral worship, as Ho put it, was the most fundamental feature of Chinese humanistic culture, and its focal value was to

1 See Stephen Davis, *Empiricism and History* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), p. 134.

stretch clans perpetuating and unbroken.²

The Duke of Zhou invented "Mandate of Heaven" theory though as he did, he never fully entrusted Heaven. The duke's personal experiences of hard struggle made him well aware that the key lay in men, not Heaven. He helped reducing the religious flavor of the theory, thus elevating humanism. Confucius further made Heaven the supreme arbitrator of moral judgment. He revered Heaven but it served the man. He did not really object religion, but he made it serve ethical education of men. Following the Duke of Zhou, Confucius established the theory of human relationship and its value. The notion of "ren" 仁 (benevolence, love), the confluence of all moral forces, as the philosopher Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895-1990) saw it, forms Confucius' "spiritual world."³ Xunzi 荀子 (313.-238 BCE), a distinguished disciple of Confucius, "interpreted all the ancient sacrificial rites of the Chinese as mere aesthetic exercises intended not for the benefit of the spirits but for the edification of the living."⁴ In a sense, Confucianism helped Chinese culture move toward rationalism and humanism.

The dazzling Chinese classical ideas which appreciated human life in its secular setting had never been interrupted in history; hence, there is in China no question of humanistic rebirth. One prominent figure who inherited the antiquity humanism was the historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (135-93 BCE),⁵ the Chinese counterpart of Herodotus. As the modern historian Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895-1990)

2 Cf. He Bingdi 何炳棣, "HuaXia renbenzhuyi wenhua:yuanyuan, tezheng ji yi (shang)" 華夏人本主義文化：淵源、特徵及意義（上） [The Chinese humanistic culture: origin, features, and meaning, part one], in *Ershishiji shuangyuekan* 二十一世紀雙月刊, no. 33 (Feb., 1996), pp. 95-99.

3 See Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo zhexueshi* 中國哲學史 [A history of Chinese philosophy], vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1940). Cf. He Bingdi, "HuaXia renbenzhuyi wenhua: yuanyuan, tezheng ji yi (xia)" 華夏人本主義文化：淵源、特徵、及意義（下） [The Chinese humanistic culture: origin, features, and meaning, part two], in *Ershishiji shuangyuekan* 二十一世紀雙月刊, no. 34 (April, 1996), pp. 88-96.

4 Cited in Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 15.

5 Cf. Wang Rongzu 汪榮祖, *Shizhuan tongshuo* 史傳通說 (*General Studies in Historiography*), (Taipei: The Linking Press, 1988), pp. 70-71.

pointed out, the concept that the man is the centre of historical force began with Sima Qian, who creatively set the standard of the man-dominated history. Thus, in Chinese history, men take precedence of events. Many made their marks in history without taking part in any events.⁶ His vision of life in which men stood in the center is all clear. He has been honored as the Grand Historian, who not only set the example of the "biographical style of historical writing" (*jizhuanti* 紀傳體) followed by later Chinese historians for more than two thousand years but also set the tone of humanist proclivity for virtually the entire traditional Chinese historiography.

The Grand Historian Sima Qian, however, was not the first who discovered the importance of man. The discovery of man, as the philosopher Feng Youlan rightly pointed out, began from pre-Qin Spring-autumn period (770-476 BCE.) during which humanistic rather than divine interpretation of institutions prevailed, comparable to "man is the measure of all things."⁷ Confucius, in particular, showed solicitude for eternal value of self, including meritorious achievements as well as immortal deeds and masterpieces. With the discovery of the self, much attention was paid to the individual function in society. Men really made the differences of events. An individual, as Mencius put it, is the root of family, of kingdom, and of state.⁸ The historian Sima Qian realized the importance of individuals in historical writing, as he saw men of various sorts played the central role in making history. As he remarked, good and honest men brought a state to rise, while a state was about to fall when good men disappeared and bad ones prevailed.⁹ The "biographical approach to history" is his creation.

There are immense number of studies on Sima Qian and his work, dealing

6 See Qian Mu 錢穆, *Zhongguo shixue mingzhu* 中國史學名著 [The Chinese famous historical works] (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 72-73.

7 See Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo zhhexueshi*, vol. 1, pp. 58-59.

8 See James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vols.1-2 (Taipei: Wenxing shudian, 1966), p. 295.

9 See Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*), vol. 6, Zhonghua edition (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), p. 1990.

mostly with the historian's life and thought, as well as the structure and style of his monumental work, namely, *Records of the Historian (Shiji)*.¹⁰ In this paper, I shall focus on the issue of humanism, trying to explore the Grand Historian's vision of history in which men stood in the center of history. In his work, indeed, men rather than gods retained the most prominent position. What he tried was to reveal the secret of history through men. I shall point out how his historical writings pronounced what the people had done rather than divine influence determined the rise or fall of a state. He made so clear that man created history, and history was humanist. He amply demonstrated his judgment of what the value of man was, for which I shall provide with as many examples as possible. In addition, based on his humanistic perspective, how he viewed brutal wars and inhumanity imposed on the people. More importantly, the Grand Historian's biographical approach and humanist proclivity fundamentally shaped and influenced traditional Chinese historiography down to the modern time.¹¹

II. A Biographical Approach to History

In his letter to his friend Ren An 任安, Sima Qian made crystal clear the aims of history writing. They were summarized as (1) "to inquiry into the different roles of man and Heaven" (*jiu tian ren zhiji* 究天人之際), (2) "to understand the changes from past to present" (*tong gu jin zhibian* 通古今之變), and (3) "to complete an authoritative history of my own" (*cheng yijia zhiyan* 成

10 See, for example, Yang Yanqi 楊燕起, Chen Keqing 陳可青, Lai Changyang 賴長揚 (comp.), *Lidai mingjia ping shiji* 歷代名家評史記 [Noted scholars' comments on Records of the Historian dynasty after dynasty] (Taipei: Boyuan chuban youxian gongsi, 1990).

11 As the Qing dynasty historian Zhao Yi 趙翼 said so confidently, Sima Qian set the rule that later historians would not be able to go beyond. See Zhao Yi, *Niershi zhaji* 廿二史劄記 [Notes on the twenty-two histories], with Du Weiyun's annotations (Taipei: Huashi chubanshe, 1977), p. 3.

一家之言).¹²

To be sure, given the time in which he lived, Sima Qian was unable to wipe clean mythology and predestination. More or less he took for granted the traditional conception of rule by the mandate of Heaven. The ruler, known as son of Heaven, was somehow predestined by Heaven. It was also the time in which witnessed the rise of the apocryphal or ominous Confucianism. The influential Confucian master Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE), in particular, advocated the theory of "correspondence between man and Heaven" (*tianren ganying* 天人感應), and Sima Qian was Dong's student. Under the circumstances, Sima seemed helpless in his work mentioning apotheosis from time to time. He began his History with Huangdi 黃帝 (the Yellow Emperor) whom he considered unreliable as legend simply because the latter was widely revered at the outset of the Han dynasty.¹³ He recorded the woman Liu became pregnant after having encountered with a dragon and gave birth to the founder of the Han dynasty;¹⁴ ostensibly, he tried to keep the legend to convey the supernatural character of "the son of Heaven" (*tianzi* 天子). As well, he tended to believe "it is natural for Heaven to return kindness to well-doers and punish evil-doers."¹⁵ Even more frequently, he attributed some unexplainable events to Heaven. For instance, he considered the rise of the Qin which enjoyed no particular advantage in comparison to other states as if with the assistance of Heaven.¹⁶ As well he remarked that the destruction of the consort family of Empress Lü 呂 and successful ascendancy of Emperor Wen 文 of Han were destined by the mandate of Heaven.¹⁷ Nevertheless, overall, Sima Qian's prudence to differentiate between facts and fantasy, as Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書

12 Quoted in Ban Gu 班固's biography of Sima Qian, in Ban Gu, *Han Shu* 漢書 [History of Former Han Dynasty], vol. 9, Zhonghua edition (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), p. 2735.

13 See Qian Zhongshu, *Guanzhui bian* 管錐編 [Limited Views], vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), p. 250.

14 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 2, p. 341.

15 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 4, p. 1235.

16 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 2, p. 685.

17 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 6, pp. 1969-1970.

(1910-1998) put it, was unprecedented.¹⁸ As a matter of fact, Sima's conception of Heaven, as the modern scholar Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1904-1982) noted, was not the same as Dong Zhongshu's. The latter's cosmological theories assigning particular influence on men could be explained, while the former regarded Heaven as an unreliable, unexplainable mysterious force, thus no real effects on human being.¹⁹ Dong's theories, indeed, never appeared in Sima's work.²⁰

Sima Qian never deny man's link to nature, but it is important to point out that he was the historian who started trying to remove divine from nature. He held "necromancers" (*fangshi* 方士), however popular and active at the time, in contempt. He found it disgusting "to serve ghosts and deities." He ridiculed those who prayed deities for help never came true. The rulers, though tired of the absurdity of the necromancers' claims to find the immortal overseas, continued to send the impossible mission so as to keep the wishful thinking alive. Consequently, the necromancers and alchemists, instead of disappearing, became ever more numerous and active, but miracle never happened.²¹

In his biography of Meng Tian 蒙恬 (?-210 BCE), the general in supervision of constructing the Great Wall, the Grand Historian rejected the superstition that Meng deserved death because the construction under his supervision "disturbed the arteries of the earth." Instead, he blamed Meng for placing terrible burden upon the people in completing the enormous project.²² Clearly, he began casting serious doubts about mysterious forces, while Master Dong remained fully committed to the belief that "good has its reward and evil

18 Qian Zhongshu, *Guanzhui bian*, vol. 1, p. 253.

19 See Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, "Lun Shiji" 論史記 [On the record of the historian], in Du Weiyun 杜維運, Chen Jingzhong 陳錦忠 (eds.), *Zhongguo shixueshi lunwen xuanji* 中國史學史論文選集 [Select essays on the history of Chinese historiography] (Taipei: Huashi chubanshe, 1980), p. 88.

20 See Stephen W. Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writing of Sima Qian* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 65.

21 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 4, p. 1401.

22 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol.8, p. 2570. Cf. Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Grand Historian of China*, pp. 148-149.

has its recompense." Sima Qian unquestionably doubted his mentor's theory that "Heaven is the Lord of the universe to determine the fate of men." First and foremost he pronounced that man and Heaven each had its own role to play and they had no cause-effect relationship to speak of. It means Heaven is not the supernatural force that governs the destiny of man. It has nothing to do with the fate of man. As Sima Qian wrote in the biography of Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊, two most charitable persons in the ancient time, the fact that such virtuous men both died from starvation made enough manifestation that Heaven was merciless and had no control of the destiny of men. As well Yan Hui 顏回 (521-481 BCE), arguably Confucius' most-favored student, died prematurely from poverty. On the contrary, the notorious blood-thirsty bandit chief Dao Zhi 盜跖 who acted so outrageously that killed innocent people on the daily basis, and yet he lived his full span. Needless to say, the historian's own sufferance from castration as the punishment for his defense of his friend Li Ling 李陵 (?-74 BCE) was as undeserved as unjust. He asked where the divine intervention, if any, was. It is important to note that living in the time taking the omnipotent Heaven for granted, he was able to question omnipotence and laid the foundation for the more secular and humanistic approach to historical writing. He set the example of telling stories of individual lives and handed them down to later generations. This new style of writing had profound influence upon Chinese historiographers to come.

His criticism of the emperors of Qin and Han to worship gods at Mountain Tai (泰山), where to perform sacrifices, symbolic of the divine election of the ruler, also demonstrated his rational thinking. Honoring Confucius as he was, he disapproved Yinyang or Omenistic Confucianism advocated by Zou Yin 騶衍 (305-240 BCE), which he termed as "impervious to reason." Those necromancers who followed Zou's talks of gods and ghosts made ridiculous claims of seeking immortality to curry favor with their ruler, but went nowhere.²³ Rather than

23 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol.7, p. 2344; vol. 4, pp. 1368-1369.

determined by fate or any supernatural forces, Sima Qian believed the rise or fall of a state was a result of many decades of human efforts, whether positive or negative. The success of the ancient states, such as Yu 虞 and Xia 夏, was because their leaders had accumulated immense kindness and charity for a long time. Likewise, over a century of hard works culminated in the rise of the great states like the Zhou and the Qin.²⁴ Indeed, Sima Qian most often referred Heaven to the "trend of the time" (*shishi* 時勢). When he said "Heaven made the Qin unify the country," for example, he meant the Qin's unification of the country was "to follow the trend of the time."

In fact, the Qin that followed the trend to rise, apart from its strategically important geographical location, thanked the advice and assistance of a long list of able men. In Li Si 李斯's (280-208 BCE) words, Duke Mu 穆公 (659-620 BCE) first sought five talented men from elsewhere, and they helped him dominate the country's western territories. Duke Xiao 孝公 (361-338 BCE) 's trust of Lord Shang 商 made the Qin a rich country with a powerful army within a single decade. King Huiwen 惠文王 (337-311 BCE) used Zhang Yi's 張儀 (?-310 BCE) strategy to expand the country vastly, broke the alliance of other six states, and laid the foundation of the first emperor's conquest in 221 BCE.²⁵

How did then the great conqueror, namely Qin Shi Huangdi 秦始皇帝 (259-210 BCE), lose his firmly grasped empire in such a short period of time? The Grand Historian fully conceded to Jia Yi's 賈誼 (200-168 BCE) arguments that the emperor "had an insatiable desire, relied on his own intelligence, mistrusted meritorious officials, alienated common people, and brutalized the country from the outset."²⁶ Ostensibly, the leader's personal faults were capable of bringing down a powerful regime in mere fifteen years. In the Grand Historian's view, man had to gain initiative in the process of history. Hence, he attributed

24 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 3, p. 759.

25 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 8, p. 2542.

26 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 1, p. 283.

success or failure, rise or fall, fortune or misfortune to man's quality, character, virtue, and efforts. He had no hesitation to generalize that "good guys contribute to a thriving state, while bad guys are responsible for its destruction."²⁷ Good talented men, in other words, determined their country's safety or precariousness.

After the fall of the Qin, the much powerful Xiang Yu 項羽 (232-202 BCE) was defeated by the underdog Liu Bang 劉邦 (256-195 BCE), as Sima Qian put it, precisely because of the difference of the two in personality. Sympathy with Xiang though Sima Qian was, he found Xiang obstinate, self-conceited, and dependence upon mere physical force that resulted in many strategic mistakes and ended in total defeat in mere five years.²⁸ Hence the grave tragedy of Xiang Yu happened not at all accidental. Liu Bang had with him the whole bunch of most distinguished able men at the time, such as Minister Xiao He 蕭何 (257-193 BCE), Advisor Zhang Liang 張良 (?-185 BCE), and General Han Xin 韓信 (230-196 BCE), to name a few. The rise of the Han dynasty founded by Liu Bang, so far as the Grand Historian could see, was due to the collective wisdom and joint efforts of numerous able persons. The historian endorsed the metaphor that a precious fur robe was made of countless fox pelts, and the magnificent pavilion could not be built by a single limb of a tree.²⁹ Here he implied that the combined wisdom and efforts of men meant a formidable power. Liu's judicious leadership, full of astuteness and resourcefulness, was also highly significant. He read the minds of people who tired of the rigid, even cruel, Qin policies, and determined to make changes. When he first entered Xianyang 咸陽, the Qin capital, as Sima Qian wrote, Liu promised the officials and people not to be disturbed, in addition to announce the abolishment of all the Qin laws which were deemed cruel.³⁰ He met the wishes of the people and "followed the trend"

27 See Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 6, p. 1990.

28 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 1, p. 339.

29 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 8, p. 2726.

30 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 2, p. 362. Cf. Burton Watson, *Records of the Historian: Chapters from the Shih Chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 118.

(*shunliu* 順流)³¹ to succeed. Hence Liu successfully became the founder of the Han Empire because of his personal quality as well as his ingenious use of human talents. When the Grand Historian exclaimed repeatedly: "is this not the will of Heaven,"³² he in effect referred Liu's success to human efforts by the grace of Heaven, or simply thanked Heavens for that! The exclamation, in other words, was an instant response to the unexplainable effect. Unsurprisingly, he found it ridiculous when the strong man Xiang Yu, before committing suicide for his tragic defeat at Wujiang 烏江, blamed Heaven for his debacle.³³ For Sima Qian, the fall of Xiang Yu, like other prominent disgraced leaders, was the price paid for his mischievous conducts forsaken by his followers.

For Sima Qian, not just great men like rulers and ministers but also various commoners, such as scholars, merchants, physicians, traveling swordsmen, assassins, peasant rebels, obsequious persons, fortune-tellers, craftsmen, and comicality all made history. The biographies of "traveling swordsmen" in particular, told a unique group of people who played in their own hands the social order and justice which the government had not yet been able to uphold. As the distinguished Japanese scholar Neitō Torajirō 內藤虎次郎 (1866-1934) pointed out, Sima Qian "recognized the social function of the individuals."³⁴ It was impossible for him to include all the individuals he so wished. Indeed, he covered in his work a wide range of individuals. All of these categories of common people he found deserved to be written in history. The selection shows his criteria of historical persons worthy to record. He chose those who showed extraordinary moral characters or had rendered distinguished service to the time in which they lived, not necessary those who occupied high political or social positions. In fact, he did not write biography for quite a few prime ministers because they appeared

31 The term "shunliu" (to follow the trend) appears in Sima Qian, *Shiji*, Zhonghua edition, vol. 6, p. 2020.

32 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 3, p. 760.

33 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 1, p. 339.

34 See Neiteng Hunan 內藤湖南, *Zhongguo shixueshi* 中國史學史 [History of Chinese Historical Writing], Ma Biao 馬彪 (trans.) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008), p. 97.

to have made no significant contributions during their tenure in office.³⁵ It was very clear in the mind of the Grand Historian that man rather than divine was the real driving force behind history. The support or opposition of the people, he believed, really determined the rise or fall of a state. In brief, man creates history, so that history is man's history.

According to Sima Qian, man in the temporal setting was not a passive actor waiting for his opportunity to come. On the contrary, those who succeeded seized the opportune moment and strove forward by means of will and courage. The able lobbyists like Fan Sui 范雎 (?-225 BCE) and Cai Ze 蔡澤 who had been unable to enlist support from any lord for long time were accepted by the Lord of Qin and successively became prime minister when the opportunity arrived.³⁶ Both Liu Jing 劉敬 and Shusun Tong 叔孫通 (?-194 BCE) assured security and order of the Han Empire for long time to come owing to their wise suggestions.³⁷

What followed was how for Sima Qian to interpret the various sorts of men who made history? His lively portraits of historical personalities are well-known. It is so lively that they border on fiction. For instance, the remark Xiang Yu and Liu Bang each made in the field when watching the passage of the First Emperor (Shi Huangdi)'s impressively dignified entourage appeared to be the historian's invention. But the historian invented the remarks to protrude the contrasts of the two different personalities. The awe-struck Liu Bang said "A great personage should be like him" (*Da zhangfu dang rushi ye* 大丈夫當如是也), while the much more audacious Xiang Yu said "He should be replaced by me" (*Bi ke quer daizhi* 彼可取而代之).³⁸ Elsewhere these two major figures were described so

35 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 8, p. 2686.

36 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 7, p. 2425.

37 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 8, pp. 2715-2726. Cf. Watson, *Records of the Historian*, pp. 216-229.

38 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 1, p. 296 (Xiang's remark); vol. 2, p. 344 (Liu's remark). Cf. Wang Mingsheng 王鳴盛, *Shiqishi shangque* 十七史商榷, vol. 1 [*Studies in the seventeen histories*] (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1971), p. 66.

vividly as well. The historian depicted Liu Bang, later the founder of the Han Empire, as a successful political leader without concealing a ruffian character. Likewise, he confirmed Xiang Yu's foolishness without sparing Xiang's gallantry.

By choosing a biographical approach to history, the Grand Historian judiciously illustrated major events through relevant individuals. The portrait of Shang Yang 商鞅 (390-338 BCE), known also as Lord of Shang, epitomized the Legalist reform and its consequences in the state of Qin. He gave prominent mention of the mediocre peasant leader Chen Sheng 陳勝 (?-208 BCE) or Chen She 陳涉 simply because the latter led the uprising which triggered the wide-spread rebellion marking the beginning of the end of the Qin Empire.³⁹ The life of Li Si 李斯 (280-208 BCE) illustrated the rise and fall of the Qin. The biography of Han Xin 韓信 (230-196 BCE) told how a great general ended in tragedy because he failed to lie low. A scholar named Lu Jia 陸賈 (240-170 BCE) played the central role in history by persuading the founding emperor of Han into entering a civilized rule after military conquest. Lu's remark that "conquest on horseback as you did, you could not manage the empire on horseback"⁴⁰ convinced the founding emperor to lead a more relaxed and stable China for a long time to come.

Remarkably, in his work, the Grand Historian took man's material life very seriously. He quoted Guan Zhong 管仲 (725-645 BCE) as saying "the full-house granaries make people understand courtesy, and enough food and clothing make people aware of shame."⁴¹ He found the fundamental importance to meet people's basic needs. "Morality are born of plenty," as he pronounced, "and abandoned in time of want." He justified wealth-seeking, as he believed "benevolence and righteousness attach themselves to a man of wealth."⁴²

39 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 6, p.1964.

40 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol.8, p. 2699.

41 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol.10, p. 3255.

42 Ibid. Cf. Watson, *Records of the Historian*, p. 336.

Sima Qian was arguably the first Chinese historian to take note of "change" in history. He wanted to understand the change of men and events from the past to the present. He wrote the past at the present was to afford the present the lesson that merited attention, even though there were discrepancies between past and present. To record the past, in other words, is to serve the present, thus making a thorough inquiry into man-led events and their changes. Sima Qian's metaphor of "mirror," alluding to self-reflection, had since become the standard Chinese use of history for thousands of years to come.

III. A Humanistic View of War

Nearly a quarter of Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian* deals with war. But the historian saw war as "the sage's last resort to end violence, to pacify turmoil, to eliminate peril, and to prevent disaster."⁴³ The sage he referred was none but Confucian-like persons, who deplored unjust wars, such as scrambling for territorial acquisition or supremacy, while regarding war as the final alternative to restore the benevolent ritual order. The Grand Historian's narration of war likewise made manifest the Confucian values. By upholding the Confucian ethical view of war, he honored the Yellow Emperor's war against Chiyu 蚩尤, King Tang's 湯 war against Xia 夏, and King Wu's 武 war against Shang as "just" because the wars were waged by sage-like leaders to oppose the corrupt and brutal rulers.⁴⁴ With the collapse of the Zhou system which Confucius admirably followed, wars became senselessly violent and waged by self-serving feudal lords. In the end, the most vicious Qin won the war of conquest. How this unjust war prevailed puzzled Sima Qian, and he had no way to explain but

43 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 4, p. 1240.

44 This argument, however, is subject to controversy. One may also argue the overthrow of an old regime is after all guilty of regicide, see Sima Qian, *Shiji*, Zhonghua edition, vol.10, pp. 3122-3123. Cf. Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Grand Historian of China*, p. 145.

attributing it to Heaven.⁴⁵ In any event, "Mandate of Heaven" was used to justify the legitimacy to rule, so that it was more political than divine.

During the Grand Historian's own time, Emperor Wu repeatedly launched massive expeditions against the Huns (Xiongnu 匈奴). The great military campaigns and territorial expansion were seen by many as the emperor's remarkable achievements. From a humanistic perspective, however, Sima Qian was disapproval of the war. He deplored that the astronomical cost of huge force, usually from 100,000 to 300,000 strong, plus even greater number of logistic suppliers exhausted state finance and caused unbearable pain to people in general. The historian felt duty-bound to record the terrible casualties of war, the impoverished treasury, the sufferance of the people, and restlessness of the whole empire. As a recent writer put it, Sima Qian sharply criticized Emperor Wu's adventures, and he himself witnessed the gradual decline of the empire.⁴⁶

Sima Qian's description of battle, instead of providing with bloody details, protruded the human spirit and determination. He cherished spiritual values, such as courage, wisdom, and justice. Take the famous battle of Julu 鉅鹿 for example, the Grand Historian showed how Xiang Yu sank all his own boats after crossing in order to register his resolve of no return. Xiang resolutely launched attacks when all others dared not send forth their troops, and he won decisively despite fighting against heavy odds.⁴⁷ Here the single individual, Xiang Yu, won the decisive battle due to his courage, bravely, and personal strength.

The military heroes in *Records of the Historian*, Xiang Yu included, are almost exclusively tragic ones. Despite his supreme physical strength, Xiang suffered the final defeat at Gaixia 垓下 and committed suicide. Han Xin's

45 See Han Zhaoqi 韓兆琦, *Shiji jianzheng* 史記箋證 [A critical study of the *Shiji*] (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 2004), pp. 1279-1280.

46 Chen Qitai 陳其泰, *Shixue yu Zhongguo wenhua chuantong* 史學與中國文化傳統 [History and Chinese cultural tradition] (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 1999), p.137.

47 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 1, p. 307; Cf. Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian*, p. 77.

supreme strategy was vital for Liu Bang to win the war over Xiang Yu, and yet once Liu successfully founded his Han dynasty, Han Xin was put to death simply because he wielded too much merits and power that made the sovereign tremble.⁴⁸ Regardless his numerously successful engagements with Xiongnu 匈奴 on the northern frontiers, the brilliant general Li Guang 李廣 (?-119 BCE) was at last being blamed that he and his troops lost their way in a battle. The general took the full responsibility and killed himself for refusing to answer the "petty clerks' list of charges."⁴⁹

The tragedy of Chinese generals Sima Qian tried to convey represents what the modern historian Lei Haizong 雷海宗 (1902-1962) termed "a-military culture" of traditional China.⁵⁰ For many thousands of years, from the classical Zhou era onward, the Chinese had continuously regarded scholars as superior to soldiers. The tradition neither set great store by martial qualities nor emphasized military achievements. Victorious generals rarely received enthusiastic receptions, and the social standing of military persons comparatively low. By the tenth century, virtually no men of honorable families would be willing to serve in the army.

IV. The Exposition of Inhumanity

Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian* faithfully recorded the cruelty of Empress Lu, the wife of Liu Bang, the founding emperor of the Han Dynasty. Out of jealousy she brutally cut off Lady Qi's 戚夫人 (?-194 BCE) hands, foot, eyes, ears, and placed her in a lavatory, in addition to poison Qi's son, King Zhao 趙, to death. Such atrocities made Empress Lu's own son, Emperor Hui 惠, feel

48 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 8, p. 2625; Watson, *Records of the historian*, pp. 194-195.

49 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 9, p. 2876; Watson, *Records of the historian*, p. 270.

50 Lei Haizong 雷海宗, *Zhongguo wenhua yu Zhongguo de bing* 中國文化與中國的兵 [Chinese culture and Chinese military] (Changsha: Yuelu shushie, 1986), p. 170.

something that "a human being could not possibly do."⁵¹ Before long, the young emperor died of dissipation.

As well the Grand Historian created "the biographies of harsh officials" to deplore the government that it depended upon harshness rather than virtue. For him virtue and a sense of shame, not law and punishment, would make people genuinely good. When the Han replaced the Qin, the meshes of the atrocious Qin law lopped off a bit. Harsh officials, however, did not disappear; in fact, they came up in succession. Their inhumanity in dealing with the people was something like to let wolves to be shepherd. Hou Feng 侯封 during Empress Lu's time even outraged members of the royal family and humiliated meritorious officials.⁵²

Sima Qian specifically enlisted a number of harsh officials for comments. He found Zhi Du 鄧都, though controversial, straightforward and still strove for general interest. Zhang Tang 張湯 (?-115 BCE) knew how to engage in double dealings and influence the ruler. Whether Zhang's arguments were right or wrong, he ran the state as he saw fit. Zhao Yu 趙禹, though upright and stuck to law as he was, he was decidedly ruthless. Du Zhou 杜周 (?-95 BCE) liked adulation and spoke less. The situation turned increasingly harsh and rigid after the death of Zhang Tang, so much so that it hampered the proper function of the government. Worse still, Governor Feng Dang 馮當 brutalized his people in the province of Sichuan. The officials like Li Zhen 李貞 dared to tear his people asunder by carts. Mi Pu 彌僕 brutally sawed people's necks off. Luo Bi 駱璧 framed people up and threw them into prison. Chu Guang 褚廣 committed wanton killings. Wu Ji 無忌 and Yin Zhou 殷周 were as vicious as vipers or hawks. Yan Feng 閻奉 was fond of beating people and atoned for one's crime by taking his bribes. All the cruelty and corruption made the Grand Historian feel

51 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 2, p. 397.

52 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol.10, p. 3132.

ashamed to count.⁵³

Sima Qian lived in a rising empire, yet the existence of extremely "harsh officials," most of them seen in his own time (Emperor Wu's reign), told him that either Daoism or Confucianism had not soften much the harsh nets of Legalism. Needless to say, the harsh officials were able to do what they did really due to the acquiescence and even support of the emperor.⁵⁴ But, as the Qing historian Wang Mingsheng 王鳴盛 (1722-1797) pointed out, "the more harsh officials you have, the worse the government you get."⁵⁵ The Grand Historian implicitly criticized his emperor for treating people too harshly, while rarely offering generosity, despite the verbal claim of benevolence. He was troubled especially by those officials who murdered people under all sorts of pretexts. Chinese scholars of many generations sometimes took Sima Qian's criticism as slander. They accused him of vilifying Emperor Wu for personal reasons. The distinguished Qing historian Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738-1801), however, effectively rebutted such accusation. In retrospect, as Zhang put it, the blighted government of Emperor Wu had been known by many, not just by the Grand Historian alone.⁵⁶ We may quickly add that the historian's criticism was driven by the deep concern about humanity.

After the world had restored, the founder of the Han Empire still prohibited merchants from wearing silk clothes and from riding in a cart, besides imposing heavy taxes on them. Later, though relaxing the restriction a little, their sons and grandsons were still not allowed to serve in the government.⁵⁷ The Grand Historian recorded frankly that relaxation and peace brought enormous wealth to the empire; however, the rich and powerful arbitrarily annexed lands, and

53 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol.10, p. 3154.

54 See Wu Jiansi 吳見思, *Shiji lunwen* 史記論文 [Studies in the Record of the Historian] (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 2008), p. 73.

55 Wang Mingsheng, *Shiqishi shangque*, vol. 1, p. 83.

56 Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠, *Wenshi tongyi* 文史通議 [General studies of history and literature] (Taipei: Guoshi yanjiushi, 1973), p. 146.

57 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 4, p. 1418.

members of royal families as well as high-ranking officials lived in luxurious life style without limit. This plus public constructions, grain transport, and frontier wars, which exhausted state finance and tens of thousand people, who were in agonies of pain, threw the empire into tumult. The repeated large-scale wars against the Huns, besides the unbearable huge expenditure on armaments and supplies, inflicted heavy casualties on both sides. In the end, all the male peasants labored in the field unable to feed the country, and all women spinning and weaving were not enough to clothe everyone.⁵⁸ To his deep regret, his ruler, Emperor Wu, who proclaimed Confucianism the state teaching in effect followed the old, harsh Legalist doctrine which brought back severe punishments and fear.

V. Conclusion

Humanism is an ostensible theme in the Grand Historian Sima Qian's great work. Having inherited China's classical humanity tradition, he developed the theme in his monumental work *Records of the Historian*, and this creative work set the example of Chinese historical writing for the next two thousand and five hundred years. As he took men as the core in his historical writing, he was the first who called into being the biographical approach to history. His History consists of a wide range of individuals from emperors and ministers to elites and commoners. He told numerous tales of individual lives, and narrated events through men. Those whom he deemed deserved a place in history not because of high office or distinguished social standing but because of significant achievements or having set high moral standards. His "man-center" historical narration carried the quality of emotion, sympathy, and humanity.

Given the time in which he lived, Sima Qian did not have a clean slate of

58 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 4, pp. 1442-1443; Cf. pp. 1420-1441.

factual accuracy; occasionally, he recorded legends and mysteries. But no one before him had tried so hard to resist superstitions or any divine influence in writing. The greatest events in his History were none but the rise and fall of the Qin dynasty and its transition to the Han dynasty. Rather than sticking to the Mandate of Heaven theory, he interpreted events in terms of human efforts. In the dramatic transition from the Qin to the Han, he found three key figures. The peasant rebel Chen Sheng shook the foundation of the Qin, Xiang Yu toppled the Empire of Qin, and Liu Bang won the war with Xiang and founded the Han Empire. For him, success or failure of a leader had almost exclusively to do with personal qualities.

A general history Sima Qian produced left behind an invaluable history of ancient China; however, he brought history to his own time with substantial contemporary concerns. He lived in a supposedly great era of Emperor Wu, and yet his humanist proclivity helped him notice the dark side of his time. The massive military campaigns and expansionism, glorious though they appeared, spelt out enormous expenditure and human cost, both of which caused suffering to people. Perhaps even more disturbing to the Grand Historian, Emperor Wu who vowed and declared Confucianism as state teaching in effect continued the Legalist practices of oppression. As a genuine admirer of Confucius, Sima Qian upheld his stand on humanity by exposing harsh officials of his time. ♦

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