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3. Humanism in Traditional Chinese Historiography – With Special Reference to the Grand Historian Sima Qian

1. 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. 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 prominently in religious belief early in Neolithic China. By the late Neolithic period ancestor worship became the supreme ceremony of tribal clans during this period. At the beginning of Chinese history, the patriarchal clan systems of Shang and Zhou were taking shape. In Zhou’s royal family, together with noble clans of various rank, when worshipping ancestors it was the descendants, either son or grandson, who would stand in for the “body” (shi 尸) of the dead ancestor when receiving worship and sacrifices. There were, in addition, interactions between those who gave sacrificial offerings and the receiver. As the research of late Professor Ping-ti Ho shows, no religion in history is as humanistic as that of 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 rested within the patriarchal clan system. Then came the “Son of Heaven” (tianzi 天子) 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 feudallord 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 perpetuate clans in an unbroken line.2

2 Cf. He Bingdi 何炳棣, “HuaXia renbenzhuyi wenhua: yuan yuan, tezheng ji yi yi (shang 華夏人本主義文化：淵源、特徵、及意義 (shang 上))” (The Chinese humanistic culture: origin,
The Duke of Zhou (Zhougong 周公) invented the “Mandate of Heaven” (tianming 天命) theory, though as he did, he never fully trusted Heaven. The Duke’s personal experiences of hard struggle made him well aware that the key lay in men, not Heaven. He helped reduce the religious flavor of the theory, thus elevating its humanistic flavor. Confucius further made Heaven the supreme arbitrator of moral judgment. He revered Heaven but it served man. He did not really object to religion, but he made it serve the 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 saw it, forms Confucius’ “spiritual world”. Xunzi 荀子, 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.” In a sense, Confucianism helped Chinese culture move toward rationalism and humanism.

These dazzling classical ideas which appreciated human life in its secular setting had never been interrupted; hence, there is in China no question of a humanistic rebirth. One prominent figure who inherited this ancient humanism was the historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 135–93 BCE), the Chinese counterpart of Herodotus. As the modern historian Qian Mu 錢穆 pointed out, the concept that man is the center of historical forces began with Sima Qian, who creatively set the standard of human-dominated history. Thus, in Chinese history, men take precedence over events. Many made their marks in history without taking part in any events. His vision of life, in which men stood in the center, is quite 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 the humanist proclivity for virtually the entire period of 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 the pre-Qin Spring and Autumn period (770–476 B.C.) during which humanistic rather than divine interpretation of institutions prevailed, comparable to “man is the measure of all things”. Confucius in particular, showed solicitude for the eternal value of the self, including meritorious achievements as well as immortal deeds and masterpieces. With the discovery of the self, much attention was paid to the individual’s function in society. In reality, it was men who made the difference in events. An individual, as Mencius put it, is the root of the family, of the kingdom, and of the state. The historian Sima Qian realized the importance of individuals in historical writing, as he saw men of various sorts playing the central role in the making of history. As he remarked, good and honest men caused a state to rise, while a state invited collapse when good men disappeared and bad ones prevailed. The “biographical approach to history” is his creation.

There are an immense number of studies on Sima Qian and his work, dealing mostly with the historian’s life and thought, as well as the structure and style of his monumental work, namely, Records of the Historian (Shi ji). 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 at the center of history. Indeed, his work showed that men rather than gods retained the most prominent position. What he tried to do was reveal the secret of history through men. I shall point out how his historical writings pronounced that it was what people had done rather than divine influence that determined the rise or fall of a state. He made it clear that man created history, and history was humanistic. 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, shows how Sima Qian viewed brutal wars and inhumanity imposed on people. More importantly, the Grand Historian’s biographical approach and humanist proclivity fundamentally shaped and influenced traditional Chinese historiography down to modern times.

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10 See, for example, Yang Yanqi 楊燕起, Chen Keqing 陳可青, Lai Changyang 賴長揚 (comp.) Lidai mingjia ping shiji 历代名家評史記 (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, Nian’er shi zhaji 廿二史劄記 (Notes on the Twenty-two Histories), with annotations by Du Weiyun 杜維運, Taipei: Huashi chubanshe, 1977, p. 3.
2. 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 inquire into the different roles of man and Heaven” (jiu tian ren zhi ji 究天人之際), (2) “to understand the changes from past to present” (tong gu jin zhi bian 通古今之變), and (3) “to complete an authoritative history of my own” (cheng yijia zhi yan 成一家之言).\(^\text{12}\)

To be sure, given the time in which he lived, Sima Qian was unable to wipe the slate clean of mythology and predestination. He took more or less for granted the traditional concept of rule by the Mandate of Heaven. The ruler, known as Son of Heaven, was somehow predestined by Heaven. It was also the time which witnessed the rise of an apocryphal or omenistic Confucianism. The influential Confucian master Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, 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 unable to avoid in his work from 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.\(^\text{13}\) He recorded that the woman Liu 劉 became pregnant after having an encounter with a dragon and then gave birth to the founder of the Han dynasty;\(^\text{14}\) ostensibly, he tried to keep the legend in order to convey the supernatural character of the Son of Heaven (tianzi). He tended as well to believe “it is natural for Heaven to return kindness to well-doers and punish evil-doers”.\(^\text{15}\) Even more frequently, he attributed some unexplainable events to Heaven; for instance, the attribution of the rise of the Qin, which enjoyed no particular advantage in comparison to other states, as if accomplished with the assistance of Heaven.\(^\text{16}\) He remarked additionally that the destruction of the consort family of Empress Lü 呂 and the successful ascendancy of Emperor Wen 文 of Han were destined by the Mandate of Heaven.\(^\text{17}\) Nevertheless, overall, Sima Qian’s prudence to in differentiating between facts and fantasy, as Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 put it, was unprecedented.\(^\text{18}\) In fact, Sima’s conception of Heaven, as the modern scholar Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 noted, was not the same as Dong Zhongshu’s. The

\(^\text{12}\) Quoted in Ban Gu’s 班固 biography of Sima Qian, in Han Shu 漢書 (History of Former Han Dynasty), Zhonghua edition, 62/2735.

\(^\text{13}\) See Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, Guanzhui bian 管錐編 (Limited Views), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979, vol. 1, p. 250.

\(^\text{14}\) Shi ji 8/341.

\(^\text{15}\) Shi ji 24/1235.

\(^\text{16}\) Shi ji 15/685.

\(^\text{17}\) Shi ji 49/1969–70.

latter’s cosmological theories assigning particular influences on men could be explained, while the former regarded Heaven as an unreliable, unexplainable mysterious force, thus exerting no real effects on human beings.\(^\text{19}\) Dong’s theories, indeed, never appeared in Sima’s work.\(^\text{20}\)

Sima Qian never denied man’s link to nature, but it is important to point out that he was the historian who started trying to remove the 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”, ridiculing those who prayed to deities for help which never came. The rulers, though tired of the absurdity of the necromancers’ claims to have found the immortals overseas, continued to send impossible missions so as to keep wishful thinking alive. Consequently, the necromancers and alchemists, instead of disappearing, became ever more numerous and active, but the longed-for miracles never happened.\(^\text{21}\)

In his biography of Meng Tian 蒙恬, 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 burdens upon the people in completing the enormous project.\(^\text{22}\) 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 has its recompense”. Sima Qian unquestionably doubted his mentor’s theory that “Heaven is the Lord of the universe which determines the fate of men”. First and foremost he pronounced that man and Heaven each had their own roles to play and that they had no cause/effect relationship to speak of. In other words, 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 ancient personalities known for their charitable natures, the fact that such virtuous men both died from starvation was evidence enough that Heaven was merciless and had no control of the destiny of men. As did Yan Hui 颜回, arguably Confucius’ most-favorite student, who died prematurely from the effects of poverty while on the contrary, the notorious blood-thirsty bandit chief Dao Zhi 盗跖, who’s


outrages included killing innocent people on a daily basis, lived out his full lifespan. Needless to say, the historian’s own acquiescence to castration as the punishment for his defense of his friend Li Ling 李陵 was as undeserved as it was unjust. He asked where the divine intervention, if any, was for him. It is important to note that living in a time when an omnipotent Heaven was taken for granted, he was still able to call into question the belief in omnipotence and laid the foundations for a more secular and humanistic approach to historical writing. He set the example of telling the stories of individual lives and handed them down to later generations. This new style of writing had profound influence upon Chinese historiographers yet to come.

His criticism of the emperors of Qin and Han worshiping gods at Mount Tai (Taishan 泰山), where they performed sacrifices symbolic of the divine election of the ruler, also demonstrated his rational approach to thinking. Honoring Confucius as he did, he disapproved of the Yin-Yang 陰陽 or Omenistic Confucianism advocated by Zou Yin 騒衍, 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 which went nowhere.23 Rather than being 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, throughout their long histories, had accumulated reputations for immense kindness and charity. Likewise, over a century of hard work culminated in the rise of great states like the Zhou and the Qin.24 Indeed, Sima Qian most often referred to Heaven as 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 this trend, apart from its strategically important geographical location, the advice and assistance of a long list of able men to thank. In Li Si 李斯’ 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’s 孝公 (361–338 BCE) trust of Lord Shang 商 made the Qin realm 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 strategy to expand the country vastly, broke the alliance of the other six states, and laid the foundation for the First Emperor’s conquest in 221 BCE.25

23 Shi ji 74/2344;28/1368–69.
24 Shi ji 16/759.
25 Shi ji 87/2542.
How then did the great conqueror, that is to say Qin Shihuangdi 秦始皇帝, lose his firm grasp on his empire in such a short period of time? The Grand Historian fully concurred with Jia Yi’s 賈誼 assertions that the emperor “had an insatiable desire, relied on his own intelligence, mistrusted creditable officials, alienated the common people and brutalized the country from the outset”. Ostensibly, the leader’s personal faults were capable of bringing down a powerful regime in a mere fifteen years. In the Grand Historian’s view, man had to gain initiative in the process of history. Hence, he attributed success or failure, rise or fall, fortune or misfortune to a man’s quality, character, virtue, and efforts. He had no hesitation in generalizing that “good guys contribute to a thriving state, while bad guys are responsible for its destruction”. Good talented men, in other words, determined their country’s safety or precariousness.

After the fall of the Qin, the mighty Xiang Yu 项羽 was defeated by the underdog Liu Bang 刘邦, as Sima Qian put it, precisely because of the difference between the two in personality. Sympathetic with Xiang though Sima Qian was, he found Xiang obstinate, conceited, and dependent upon mere physical force, resulting in many strategic mistakes which ended in total defeat in a mere five years. Hence, the grave tragedy of Xiang Yu did not happen at all by accident. Liu Bang had with him the whole assembly of the most distinguished and able men of the time, such as Minister Xiao He 蕭何, Advisor Zhang Liang 張良, and General Han Xin 韓信, 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 personalities. The historian endorsed the extended 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. 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 first entering Xianyang 咸陽, the Qin capital, as Sima Qian wrote, Liu promised that the officials and people would not be disturbed, in addition to the announcing of the abolishment of all the Qin laws which were deemed cruel. He met the wishes of the people and “followed the trend” (shunliu 順流) to success. Hence Liu became the successful founder of the Han Empire because of his personal qualities as well as his

26 Shi ji 6/283.
27 Shi ji 50/1990.
28 Shi ji 7/339.
29 Shi ji 99/2726.
31 The term appears in Shi ji 53/2020.
ingenious use of human talent. When the Grand Historian exclaimed repeatedly: “is this not the will of Heaven”, he in effect referred Liu’s success to human efforts by the grace of Heaven, or simply thanked the Heavens! 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, blamed Heaven for his debacle. For Sima Qian, the fall of Xiang Yu, like other prominent disgraced leaders, was the price paid for his inappropriate conduct: to be forsaken by his followers.

For Sima Qian, it was not just great men like rulers and ministers, but also various commoners, such as scholars, merchants, physicians, traveling swordsmen, assassins, peasant rebels, the deferential and obedient, fortune-tellers, craftsmen, and comedians all made history. The biographies of “traveling swordsmen” in particular, told of a unique group of people who took the law into their own hands in order to uphold the social order and maintain justice which the government had been unable to uphold. As the distinguished Japanese scholar Naitō Torajirō pointed out, Sima Qian “recognized the social function of the individuals”. It was impossible for him to include all the individuals he wished to include; although he did cover in his work a wide range of individuals. All of these categories of common people he found were deserving of being written into history. The selection shows his criteria for historical persons worthy to record. He chose those who possessed extraordinary moral characters or had rendered distinguished service to the time in which they lived, not necessarily those who occupied high political or social positions. In fact, he did not write biographies for quite a few prime ministers because they appeared to have made no significant contributions during their tenure in office. It was very clear in the mind of the Grand Historian that man rather than the 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 that of man’s history.

According to Sima Qian, man in his 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 范睢 and Cai Ze 蔡澤 who had been unable to enlist support from any lord for a long time were accepted by the Lord of Qin and successively became prime minister when the opportunity arrived. Both Liu Jing

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32 Shi ji 16/760.
35 Shi ji 96/2686.
36 Shi ji79/2425.
劉敬 and Shusun Tong 叔孫通 assured the security and order of the Han Empire for a very long time owing to their wise suggestions.37

What followed for Sima Qian was: how to interpret the various sorts of men who made history? His lively portraits of historical personalities are well-known; so lively in fact 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’s (Qin Shihuangdi’s) impressively dignified entourage appeared to be the historian’s invention. But the historian invented these remarks to project the contrasts of the two different personalities. The awe-struck Liu Bang said “A great personage should be like him” (da zhangfu dang ru shi ye 大丈夫當如是也), while the much more audacious Xiang Yu said “He should be replaced by me” (bi ke qu er dai zhi 彼可取而代之).38 Elsewhere these two major figures were described just as vividly. The historian depicted Liu Bang, later the founder of the Han Empire, as a successful political leader without concealing his rough 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, 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 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 illustrated the rise and fall of the Qin; the biography of Han Xin 韓信 told of how a great general ended tragically because he failed to lie low. A scholar named Lu Jia 陸賈 played a central role in history by persuading the founding emperor of Han to enter into a civilized rule after his military conquests. Lu’s remark that “conquering 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 many years to come.

Remarkably in his work, the Grand Historian took man’s mortal existence very seriously. He quoted Guan Zhong 管仲 as saying “the full-house granaries make people know courtesy, and enough food and clothing make people aware of shame”.41 He found fundamental importance in meeting people’s basic needs. “Morality is born of plenty”, as he pronounced, “and abandoned in time of

39 Shi ji 48/1964.
40 Shi ji 97/2699.
41 Shi ji, vol. 10, p. 129/3255.
want”. He justified wealth-seeking, as he believed “benevolence and righteousness attach themselves to a man of wealth”.42

Sima Qian was arguably the first Chinese historian to take note of “change” in history. He wanted to understand the changes in men and events from the past to the present. His writing of the past for 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 human-led events and their changes. Sima Qian’s metaphor of “mirror”, alluding to self-reflection, had since become the standard for the Chinese use of history for thousands of years.

3. 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 sages he referred to were none but those of Confucian-like persuasion, 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 these Confucian values. By upholding the Confucian ethical view of war, he honored the Yellow Emperor’s war against Chiyou 蚩尤, King Tang’s 黃河 war against Xia 夏, and King Wu’s 武王 war against Shang as “just” because the wars were waged by sage-like leaders in order to oppose corrupt and brutal rulers.44 With the collapse of the Zhou system which Confucius admired, 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 it except to attribute the outcome to Heaven.45 In any event, the “Mandate of Heaven” was used to justify the legitimacy of a ruler so that it was located more in the political realm than the 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 most re-

43 Shi ji 25/1240.
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 Shi ji 121/3122–23. Cf. Watson, Ssu-ma Ch’ien. Grand Historian of China, p. 145.
markable achievements. From a humanistic perspective, however, Sima Qian disapproved of the war. He deplored the astronomical cost of maintaining a huge force, usually from 100,000 to 300,000 strong, plus the even greater number of logistic suppliers who exhausted state finances and caused unbearable pain to the people in general. The historian felt duty-bound to record the terrible casualties of war, the impoverished treasury, the sufferings of the people, and the agitation 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 the reader with bloody details, emphasized 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 told of how Xiang Yu sank all his own boats after crossing in order to register his resolve to not turn back. Xiang resolutely launched attacks when all others dared not to 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, bravery, and personal strength.

The military heroes in *Records of the Historian*, Xiang Yu included, are almost exclusively tragic figures. Despite his supreme physical strength, Xiang suffered final defeat at Gaixia 垛下 and committed suicide. Han Xin’s supreme strategy was vital for Liu Bang to win the war over Xiang Yu, and yet once Liu successfully founded his dynasty, Han Xin was put to death simply because he had acquired too much honor and power so that it made the sovereign tremble.\(^{48}\) Regardless of his numerous successful engagements with Xiongnu 匈奴 on the northern frontiers, the brilliant general Li Guang 李廣 was in the end being blamed for himself and his troops losing their way in a battle. The general took the full responsibility and killed himself, refusing to answer the “petty clerks’ list of charges”.\(^ {49}\)

The tragedies of the Chinese generals Sima Qian tried to convey represent what the modern historian Lei Haizong 雷海宗 termed the “a-military culture” of traditional China.\(^ {50}\) For many thousands of years, from the classical Zhou era onward, the Chinese have 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

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47 *Shi ji* 7/307; cf. Watson, Chapters from the *Shih chi*, p. 77.
48 *Shi ji* 92/2625; Watson, Chapters from the *Shih chi*, p. 194–95.
49 *Shi ji* 109/2876; Watson, Chapters from the *Shih chi*, p. 270.
the social standing of military persons was comparatively low. By the tenth
century, virtually no men of honorable families would be willing to serve in the
army.

4. The Exposition of Inhumanity

Sima Qian’s *Records of the Historian* faithfully recorded the cruelty of Empress
Lü, the wife of Liu Bang, the founding emperor of the Han Dynasty. Out of
jealousy she brutally cut off Lady Qi’s hands, feet, eyes, ears, and had her placed in a lavatory in addition to the poisoning death of Qi’s son, King Zhao. Such atrocities caused Empress Lü’s own son, Emperor Hui, to conclude that there were some things that “a human being should not possibly do”.

Before long, the young emperor died of dissipation. Additionally, the Grand Historian created “the biographies of harsh officials” in order to deplore a government that depended upon harshness rather than virtue. For him virtue and a sense of humility, not law and punishment, would make people genuinely good. When the Han replaced the Qin, the mazes and entrapments of the atrocious Qin legal system were eased up a bit. Callous officials however, did not disappear; in fact, they arose in succession. Their inhumanity in dealing with the common people was something akin to letting wolves be sheep dogs. During Empress Lü’s time, Hou Feng outraged even members of the royal family and humiliated the most praiseworthy officials.

Sima Qian specifically listed a number of harsh officials for commentary. He found Zhi Du, though controversial, straightforward and still strove for the general good. Zhang Tang was a double dealer and influence peddler. Whether or not Zhang’s arguments were right or wrong, he ran the state as he saw fit. Zhao Yu, though upright and law abiding as he was, was also decidedly ruthless. Du Zhou liked adulation but was otherwise seldom heard from. The situation turned increasingly harsh and rigid after the death of Zhang Tang, so much so that it hampered the proper functioning of the government. Worse still was Governor Feng who brutalized his people in the province of Sichuan. Officials like Li Zhen considered it acceptable practice to tear his subjects apart – using carts to do so. Mi Pu sawed his subjects’ heads off. Luo Bi was in the habit of falsely accusing people and throwing into prison. Chu Guang committed wanton killings; Wu Ji 無忌 and Yin Zhou 殷周 were as vicious as vipers and raptors, while Yan Feng was fond of beating people and only let them go if they paid him

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51 Shi ji 9/397.
52 Shi ji 120/3132.
bribes. All this cruelty and corruption made the Grand Historian feel too ashamed to enumerate.\textsuperscript{53}

Sima Qian lived in an emerging empire, yet the existence of these extremely “harsh officials”, most of them of his own time (Emperor Wu’s reign), told him that neither Daoism nor Confucianism had done much to soften the merciless snares of Legalism. Needless to say, that these brutal officials were able to do what they did was really due to the acquiescence and even support of the emperor.\textsuperscript{54} But, as the Qing historian Wang Mingsheng 王鳴盛 pointed out, “the more harsh officials you have, the worse the government you get”.\textsuperscript{55} The Grand Historian implicitly criticized his emperor for treating people too harshly while rarely offering generosity, despite verbal claims of benevolence. He was especially troubled by those officials who murdered people under any and all sorts of pretexts. Many generations of Chinese scholars sometimes took Sima Qian’s criticism as slander, accusing him of vilifying Emperor Wu for personal reasons. The distinguished Qing historian Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠, however, effectively rebutted such accusations. In retrospect, as Zhang put it, the blighted government of Emperor Wu had been known by many, not just by the Grand Historian alone.\textsuperscript{56} We may quickly add that the historian’s criticism was driven by his deep concern for humanity.

After the realm had been restored to order, the founder of the Han Empire still prohibited merchants from wearing silk clothes and from riding in carts, besides imposing heavy taxes on them. Later, though relaxing the restrictions a little, their sons and grandsons were still not allowed to serve in the government.\textsuperscript{57} The Grand Historian frankly recorded that moderation and peace brought enormous wealth to the empire; however, the rich and powerful would arbitrarily annex lands while members of royal families as well as high-ranking officials lived in limitless luxury. All this, plus the costs of constructing public works, grain transport and frontier wars exhausted state finances and made life unendurable for tens of thousand people, throwing the empire into tumult. The repeated large-scale wars against the Huns, besides the unbearably huge expenditure on armaments and supplies, inflicted heavy casualties on both sides. In the end all the farmers laboring in the fields were unable to feed the country, and all the spinning and weaving women were not enough to clothe everyone.\textsuperscript{58} To Qian’s deep

\textsuperscript{53} Shi ji 122/3154.
\textsuperscript{54} See Wu Jiansi 吳見思, Shi ji lunwen 史記論文 (Studies in the Records of the Historian), Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 2008, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{55} Wang Mingsheng, Shiqishi shangque, vol. 1, p. 83.
\textsuperscript{56} Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠, Wenshi tongyi 文史通議 (Comprehensive Discussions of Literary Writings and Historiography), edn. Taipei: Guoshi yanjiushi, 1973), p. 146.
\textsuperscript{57} Shi ji 30/1418. 
\textsuperscript{58} Shi ji 30/1442–43; cf. 30/1420–41.
regret, his ruler, Emperor Wu, who had proclaimed Confucianism the state-doctrine, was in effect following the old, harsh Legalist code which resulted in severe punishments and a traumatized populace.

5. Conclusion

Humanism is an ostensible theme throughout the Grand Historian Sima Qian’s great work. Having inherited China’s classical humanist 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 the individual as the core in his historical writing, he was the first to make use of 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 them. Those whom he deemed deserving of a place in history were not chosen because of high office or distinguished social standing but because of significant achievements or having set high moral standards. His “man-centered” historical narrative passed on the qualities of emotion, sympathy, and humanity.

Given the time in which he lived, Sima Qian did not have a clean slate of 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 history. The greatest events in his *History* were solely 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, who shook the foundations of the Qin; Xiang Yu, who toppled the Empire of Qin, and Liu Bang, who won the war with Xiang and founded the Han dynasty. For him, the success or failure of a leader had almost exclusively to do with their personal qualities.

The general history Sima Qian produced bequeathed to later generations an invaluable history of ancient China; however, he brought history to his own time with substantial contemporary concerns. He lived in the supposedly great era of Emperor Wu, and yet his humanist proclivities 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, this emperor who avowed and declared Confucianism as state doctrine in effect continued the Legalist practices of oppression. As a genuine admirer of Confucius, Sima Qian upheld his stand for humanity by exposing the officially sanctioned brutality of his time.