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# Form and Narrative in Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Shih chi*

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## Introduction

About 99 B.C., a quiet revolution in historical representation took place in Ch'ang-an, China. There an obscure government official completed a private history of the entire world as he knew it (which of course was China and its bordering regions) from earliest times to his own day. This official, Ssu-ma Ch'ien 司馬遷 (145?-86? B.C.), changed the shape of history in China by rejecting the traditional models of chronological presentation (as in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋) and collections of speeches (as in the *Book of Documents* 尚書), and instead gave his history, *The Shih chi* (*Historical Records* 史記), a new five-part structure consisting of "basic annals" (*pen-chi* 本紀, which record imperial reigns), "chronological tables" (*piao* 表), "treatises" (*shu* 書, on rites, music, astronomy, etc.), "hereditary houses" (*shih-chia* 世家, devoted to the feudal lords), and "collected biographies" (*lieh-chuan* 列傳). Ssu-ma relied heavily on earlier documentary sources, which he often paraphrased or quoted directly, and in nearly every chapter he appended personal comments set off by the phrase "The Grand Astrologer remarks."<sup>1</sup> Although there were probably precedents for most of the *Shih chi*'s five sections, Ssu-ma Ch'ien was the first to combine them into a comprehensive representation of history.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, at least to Westerners, this rather complicated arrangement eventually became ex-

<sup>1</sup>The *Shih chi* was actually begun by Ssu-ma Ch'ien's father, Ssu-ma T'an 司馬談, but it is unclear how much T'an had written before his death in 110 B.C. Li Chang-chih 李長之 identifies eight chapters of the *Shih chi* which he feels were probably written by Ssu-ma T'an, and nine others which could have been written by either T'an or Ch'ien. This is out of a total of 130 chapters. Other scholars, on much less evidence, have suggested that as many as 37 chapters were written by T'an, but this seems unlikely. See Li Chang-chih, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien chih jen-ko yü feng-ko* 司馬遷之人格與風格 (Shanghai: K'ai-ming shu-tien, 1948), 155-163 and Chang Ta-k'o 張大可, *Shih chi yen-chiu* 史記研究 (Lanchow: Kan-su jen-min ch'u-pan-she, 1985), 58-73. Almost everything we know of Ssu-ma Ch'ien and his father comes from Ch'ien's autobiographical chapter at the end of the *Shih chi*, and the additions of Pan Ku 班固 at *Han shu* 漢書 62. For a translation of these writings and a more complete description of the form of the *Shih chi*, see Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 40-69, 101-134. The *Shih chi* has not yet been translated in its entirety into a Western language, but Chavannes translated chapters 1-50 and Watson has translated the many chapters dealing with the Han Dynasty. There is also a Russian translation by P. A. Viatkin which is nearing completion; five of a projected six volumes have been published. See Édouard Chavannes, *Les mémoires historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien*, 6 vols. (Paris: E. Leroux, 1895-1905 and 1969 [vol. 6]); Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); and P. A. Viatkin, *Istoricheskie zapiski ("Shi czi" [Shih chi]), Perevod s kitajskogo i kommentarij* 5 vols. (Moscow: 1972- ). Timoteus Pokora has prepared a bibliography of Western translations of individual *Shih chi* chapters which is included in the sixth volume of Chavannes.

<sup>2</sup>See Takigawa Kametarō 滝川龜太郎, *Shiki kaichū koshō* 史記會注考證, 10 vols. (Tokyo: Tōhō bunkagakuin Tokyo kenkyūjo, 1934), 10: Appendix, 77-86; Lu Nan-ch'iao 盧南喬, "Lun Ssu-ma Ch'ien chi ch'i li-shih pien-tsuān hsüeh" 論司馬遷及其歷史編纂學, in *Ssu-ma Ch'ien yü Shih chi lun-chi* 司馬遷與史記論集, no ed. (Sian: Shan-hsi jen-min ch'u-pan-she, 1982), 71-74; and Watson, *Grand Historian*, 108-130.

tremely influential and served as the model for the twenty-six "Standard Histories," which each dynasty wrote for its predecessor, and which as a group constitute our main source for Chinese history.<sup>3</sup>

Western sinologists have long been familiar with the *Shih chi* and have lauded its historical research and literary style, yet they have failed to fully appreciate the narrative possibilities inherent in Ssu-ma's arrangement of history. In this paper I will argue that Ssu-ma Ch'ien's form functions as a flexible hermeneutical tool within the Confucian tradition of historiography, a tradition whose ideal of objectivity does not match the Western ideal so often attributed to Ssu-ma's work. I will give several examples that illustrate the strength of the Ssu-ma Ch'ien's form, and in particular, I will discuss the two types of narration which reveal the most about Ssu-ma's historiography—parallel accounts and modified sources.

### *The Function of the Form: Objectivity?*

What was the purpose of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's elaborate organization? The first answer has to be readability. Stories told within the old chronological framework were hard to follow since several different tales had to be told at the same time, year by year. By distributing his material among several chapters, Ssu-ma Ch'ien could narrate a single storyline, following the actions of characters from beginning to end, while shifting additional details and characters to other chapters. This means that the same story may be told in more than one chapter, with slightly different emphases, and that a single event may figure in more than one story, depending on how it affected the subject of a particular biography. Ssu-ma Ch'ien at times refers his readers to other chapters for fuller versions of stories, but this device is not always used, and one must usually read several chapters to gain a complete picture of a particular individual. The *Shih chi* is long (some four times the length of Thucydides' history) and complex, but the narratives are lively and engaging, and as complicated as it is, the *Shih chi* is a marvel of clarity compared to older chronological histories such as the *Tso chuan* 左傳.

Chinese commentators have long appreciated the versatility of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's innovative form. For example, the Ch'ing dynasty scholar Chao I 趙翼 (1727-1814), drawing on traditions dating back to the Han dynasty, writes:

In ancient times, the historian on the left recorded the words of the emperor and the historian on the right recorded his actions. The record of words became the *Book of Documents*, and the record of actions became the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Later these developed into two types of history—narrative and annalistic. In narrative histories, each chapter narrates one event, but is not able to include everything from that time period. Conversely, annalistic histories are not able to concentrate on single individuals and observe the beginnings and endings of each one. Ssu-ma Ch'ien carefully considered the whole of history and invented the form of comprehensive history,

<sup>3</sup>Though all twenty-six Standard Histories include annals, biographies, and personal comments, there is some variation in the other features. Nineteen histories have treatises, eleven have chronological tables, and seven have autobiographical chapters. See Chang Chih-che 張志哲, *Chung-kuo shih-chi kai-lun* 中國史籍概論 (Kiangsu: Chiang-su ku-chi ch'u-pan-she, 1988). The personal comments of the historians were considered so important that they were collected into a single work in the Ch'ing dynasty: Sung Hsi 宋晞, ed., *Cheng-shih lun-tsan* 正史論贊, 4 vols. (rpt., Taipei: Chung-hua wen-hua, 1956).

which revealed the commonplace and uncovered examples through the basic annals, which narrate kings and emperors; the hereditary houses, which recount nobility and kingdoms; the ten tables, which link times and events; the eight treatises, which detail institutions; and the collected biographies, which record human affairs. Afterwards, the rulers, subjects, government, events, and worthies of a time period were not lost, but were all gathered within one compilation. Ever since this model was first established, historians have not been able to surpass its scope. It is the highest standard for true historians.<sup>4</sup>

This description of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's contribution to the Chinese historiographical tradition is significant for several reasons. First, it is astonishing that Chao I, writing toward the end of the imperial era, still considers the *Shih chi* to be the model for serious history. Second, Ssu-ma's complex organization is seen as overcoming the weaknesses inherent in earlier historical forms. It combines the focus of narrative history with the comprehensiveness of annalistic history. And third, Chao reaffirms the orthodox judgment that history originated within the Confucian tradition; his examples of narrative and annalistic histories, the *Documents* and the *Annals*, were both associated with Confucius (traditionally assumed to be the editor of the former and the author of the latter). This interpretation does not exactly do justice to the *Shih chi*, which also incorporates the anecdotal style and arrangement by states found in earlier texts such as the *Kuo yü* 國語 (*Conversations of the States*) and the *Chan-kuo ts'e* 戰國策 (*Intrigues of the Warring States*), but the idea that Ssu-ma was consolidating and furthering the Confucian tradition of historiography is important. Chinese critics have generally seen Ssu-ma Ch'ien as a successor to Confucius, and with good reason.<sup>5</sup> In his autobiography, Ssu-ma makes it clear that his ambition was to continue Confucius' historical endeavors, and his emulation of Confucius became near identification when he recounted his father's deathbed charge to accept the legendary mantle of Confucius and continue the *Spring and Autumn Annals* by completing the *Shih chi*.<sup>6</sup>

However, this presents a problem for Western sinologists since Confucius' reputation as a historian has been somewhat suspect. According to the canonized commentaries on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Confucius sometimes deliberately distorted the historical record in order to communicate moral principles more effectively. For example, in 607 B.C. when an official allowed an assassin to go unpunished, the scribe at court labelled that official, rather than the actual killer, as the murderer. Confucius is said to have explicitly approved of this dubious entry.<sup>7</sup> On

<sup>4</sup>Chao I, *Nien-erh-shih cha-chi* 廿二史劄記, 2 vols. (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1963), 1:3.

<sup>5</sup>Others have suggested different ways to connect the *Shih chi* to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*—the T'ang dynasty critic Liu Chih-chi 劉知幾 (A.D. 661-721) suggested that the biographies (*chuan* 傳) explicate the events mentioned in the basic annals, just as the canonized commentaries (*chuan* 傳) explain the *Annals*; Fan Wen-lan 范文瀾 thought that the twelve basic annals corresponded to the twelve dukes of the *Annals*—but the firm connection between Confucius and Ssu-ma Ch'ien is a constant feature of *Shih chi* criticism. Liu Chih-chi and P'u Ch'i-lung 蒲起龍 (1679-1762), *Shih t'ung t'ung shih* 史通通釋 (Shanghai: Shih-chieh shu-chü, 1935), 10; Fan Wen-lan, *Cheng-shih k'ao lüeh* 正史考略 (Peking: Pei-p'ing wen-hua hsüeh-she, 1931), 9. For more details on Ssu-ma's relationship to Confucius, see Li Chang-chih, 44-78.

<sup>6</sup>The "legendary mantle" refers to the theory of Mencius (372-289 B.C.) that a true king would arise every five hundred years. In *Mencius* 7B.38 Confucius is named as the last of the true sovereigns (though Confucius was not recognized as a king), and T'an evidently wanted his son to be the next in line. See also *Mencius* 2B.13.

<sup>7</sup>Tso *chuan*, Duke Hsüan, 2nd year; also at SC 39.1675.

the other hand, there is also a tradition which portrays Confucius as meticulously insuring the accuracy of his history:

When Confucius arranged the *Spring and Autumn Annals* according to the historical writings, he recorded the initial year of a reign and fixed the time by month and day; such was his exactitude. . . . When he had doubts he notified readers of his doubts; such was his carefulness.<sup>8</sup>

Thus Chinese readers expected history, somewhat contradictorily, to be both objective and didactic, even if distortions were required to make moral points clear.<sup>9</sup>

Western commentators have been perplexed by this inconsistency, and when the question arose of how exactly Ssu-ma Ch'ien had continued the *Annals*, sinologists such as Burton Watson argued that Ssu-ma had followed only the objective portion of Confucius' program:

Fortunately, as I have said, Ssu-ma Ch'ien did not attempt to imitate the perversions, the suppressions, the deliberate distortions of fact, that the commentaries attribute to the labors of Confucius. Such an effort would have been both presumptuous and absurd. For Ssu-ma Ch'ien felt that the facts of history, recorded just as he found them, told a story sufficiently interesting and instructive. It is the first principle I have noted in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the tradition of Confucius' care and honesty in the handling of his sources, that Ssu-ma Ch'ien set himself to emulate.<sup>10</sup>

Or more precisely, it was the innovative structure of the *Shih chi* which allowed Ssu-ma Ch'ien to continue Confucius' objectivity, while still including the judgments that Chinese readers expected of their historians. By dividing his material among several chapters, Ssu-ma could follow his sources more closely, and he could reserve his own interpretations in the sections where he gives his personal comments.

This concept of the function of the *Shih chi*'s form has been standard in the West since the publication in 1895 of the first volume of Édouard Chavannes's monumental translation. This volume included a 225-page introduction which characterized Ssu-ma Ch'ien's history as a collection of verbatim quotations from ancient sources, selected and joined together in the manner of traditional Chinese history which Chavannes described as "une mosaïque habile où les écrits des âges précédents sont placés les uns côté des autres, l'auteur n'intervenant que par la sélection qu'il fait entre ces textes et la plus ou moins grande habilité avec laquelle il les raccorde."<sup>11</sup> Chavannes noted Ssu-ma's brief interpretive comments appended at the end of most

<sup>8</sup>SC 13.487. For further discussions of the tension between objectivity and interpretation in the *Annals* see Watson, *Grand Historian*, 75-85; E. G. Pulleyblank, "The Historiographical Tradition," in *The Legacy of China*, ed. Raymond Dawson (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 144-146; and P. van der Loon, "The Ancient Chinese Chronicles and the Growth of Historical Ideals," in *Historians of China and Japan*, ed. W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleyblank (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 26-29.

<sup>9</sup>It is important to note that this program was ascribed to Confucius and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* by the commentaries. We do not know if this was actually Confucius' intention, or if he even had anything to do with the production of the *Annals*. Modern scholarship has vigorously contested the type of covert criticism the *Kung Yang* 公羊 and *Ku Liang* 穀梁 commentaries purport to find in the *Annals*, but this mode of reading was accepted by Ssu-ma Ch'ien and his Han dynasty contemporaries. See George A. Kennedy, "Interpretation of the *Ch'un Ch'iu*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62 (1942): 40-48.

<sup>10</sup>Watson, *Grand Historian*, 85-86.

<sup>11</sup>"A clever mosaic where the writings of past ages are placed side by side, with the author intervening only in the selection which he makes among these texts and the lesser or greater ability with which he fits them together" (Chavannes, 1:iii).

chapters, but felt that the historian was primarily, as he himself claimed, "a transmitter and not a creator" of history.<sup>12</sup> In addition, he praised Ssu-ma's careful gathering and faithful reproduction of ancient sources which otherwise would have been lost.

Recent commentators have modified this description somewhat—for instance, Derk Bodde has noted several speeches which, for historical and linguistic reasons, appear to have been invented by Ssu-ma Ch'ien for dramatic effect, and Burton Watson has suggested that Ssu-ma was the main author of his accounts of contemporary events—but for the most part Chavannes's model has remained dominant.<sup>13</sup> Thus E. G. Pulleyblank writes:

One of the most important features of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's work to become a constant principle may be called 'objectivity'. This means that the historian composed his narrative as a patchwork of excerpts, often abridged but otherwise unaltered, from his sources, with any personal comment or judgement kept clearly separate. The work of the historian was to compile a set of documents which would speak for themselves rather than to make an imaginative reconstruction of past events.<sup>14</sup>

Many scholars, both Chinese and Western, have noted some limited interpretive possibilities in the hierarchy of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's major divisions. For example, Confucius' biography appears in the hereditary houses despite the fact that he was not of noble birth, and early commentators such as Ssu-ma Chen 司馬貞 (fl. A.D. 719) and Chang Shou-chieh 張守節 (fl. A.D. 730) regarded this as an extraordinary honor.<sup>15</sup> So also it was unflattering to have one's biography included in the chapter entitled "Harsh Officials," and still less flattering to be left out entirely. Burton Watson has seen in this capacity a method of reconciling the two contradictory tendencies he discerned in Confucian historiography:

This dilemma, the distressing discrepancy between what we would like history to say and what it actually says, was solved by Ssu-ma Ch'ien in a unique way. He did not dare, like Confucius, deliberately to suppress or alter the facts. Indeed such a procedure would have been inimical to the new conception of historical writing he was striving to create. He was bound to tell all that his sources told him. But he was not

<sup>12</sup>SC 130.3299-3300. Confucius made the same claim in the *Analects*, VII.1, and Ssu-ma's borrowed phrasing confirms his emulation of the Sage. See Stephen W. Durrant, "Self as the Intersection of Traditions: The Autobiographical Writings of Ssu-ma Ch'ien," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106 (1986): 38.

<sup>13</sup>Derk Bodde, *China's First Unifier* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1938), 92-95, 98-100, *Statesman, Patriot, and General in Ancient China* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1940), 39-41, 63-64; Burton Watson, *Early Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 94-98.

<sup>14</sup>E. G. Pulleyblank, 149-150. For affirmations and discussions of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's objectivity and accuracy, see Charles S. Gardner, *Chinese Traditional Historiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), 17-20; Homer H. Dubs, "The Reliability of Chinese Histories," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 6 (1946): 23-43; Watson, *Grand Historian*, 85-100; van der Loon, 29-30; Michael Loewe, *Imperial China* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), 281-286; and Wolfram Eberhard, *A History of China*, 4th ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 104.

Some Chinese scholars such as Chou Hu-lin 周虎林 have recently adopted this Western praise for Ssu-ma Ch'ien's objectivity, but, significantly, Chou does not see this as conflicting with Ssu-ma's sagely interpretations. Chou Hu-lin, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien yü ch'i shih-hsüeh* 司馬遷與其史學 (Taipei: Wen-shih-che ch'u-pan-she, 1978), 199-202, 213-221. On the other hand, certain Western scholars have begun applying to the *Shih chi* methods of literary analysis originally developed for fiction. This approach is promising, but ultimately limited if it does not recognize that Ssu-ma himself did not regard his work as fictional. See William Dolby and John Scott, trans., *Warlords* [excerpts from the *Shih chi*] (Edinburgh: Southside, 1974), 9-52; and Joseph R. Allen, "An Introductory Study of Narrative Structure in the *Shi ji*," *Chinese Literature, Essays, Articles, and Reviews* 3 (1981): 31-66.

<sup>15</sup>SC 47.1905.

bound to tell it all in the same place. The various large sections and one-hundred-and-thirty chapters of the *Shih chi* represent no merely arbitrary divisions of Ch'ien's material. Each one is a significant formal unit whose contents have been selected and disposed with care and intention.<sup>16</sup>

All this attention to "objectivity" now seems dated given the current controversy surrounding this ideal, yet evidence of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's concern for historical accuracy can be found throughout the *Shih chi*, particularly in the sections where he gives his personal comments.<sup>17</sup> In these passages we see Ssu-ma Ch'ien struggling with problems of historical evidence and attempting to develop a critical methodology. He was acutely aware of the importance and difficulties of documentary sources, and he evaluated those sources by carefully comparing them with texts of known authenticity (he names over eighty texts that he used, plus numerous inscriptions and memorials).<sup>18</sup> He also double-checked documentary evidence and gathered new information through travel and interviews of eye-witnesses. Ssu-ma made it a rule not to guess on matters where he had insufficient evidence (particularly when dealing with early history), and he deliberately omitted details of doubtful authenticity. He argued that facts could only be properly interpreted in context, and insisted that analyses take into consideration both the beginnings and ends of historical processes. When he did discover that generally-accepted accounts were false, he tried to point out and correct those errors in direct comments.<sup>19</sup> Finally, he cultivated a critical attitude which acknowledged deficiencies in the Confucian Classics, and he remained skeptical even of his own direct observations.<sup>20</sup>

Ssu-ma Ch'ien's historical research is an impressive achievement, and his standards for evidence and argumentation stand up well to those of any ancient historian. Indeed, the *Shih chi* seemed to many to fulfill the 19th century Western historiographical ideal which required a clear separation between the story told about the past and the historian's own explanations of it.<sup>21</sup> Yet I believe this interpretation of the *Shih chi*'s form is ultimately misleading for three reasons. First, in his discussions of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Ssu-ma Ch'ien emphasized their interpretive aspect and usefulness as a guide for behavior. This is clearly what he most admired and most wished to emulate.<sup>22</sup>

Second, there is not enough interpretation in Ssu-ma's personal comments to fulfill his historiographical ambitions, which were very broad:

I have gathered together the old traditions of the world which were neglected and lost, and investigated their deeds and affairs. I have searched into the principles be-

<sup>16</sup>Watson, *Grand Historian*, 95.

<sup>17</sup>See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: the "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>18</sup>See especially his comments at the end of SC 1. For various discussions and lists of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's written sources, see Takigawa, 10: Appendix, 50-69; Juan Chih-sheng 阮芝生, "T'ai-shih kung tsen-yang sou-chi ho ch'u-li shih-liao" 太史公怎樣搜集和處理史料, *Shu-mu chi-k'an* 書目季刊 7.4 (Mar. 1974), 17-35; and Chang Ta-k'o, 230-271.

<sup>19</sup>Examples of these methods and restrictions appear in the comments at chapters 4, 7, 13, 15, 17, 18, 29, 30, 43, 44, 47, 49, 67, 69, 75, 77, 78, 84, 86, 87, 88, 95, 97, 103, 104, 127, 128, and 129.

<sup>20</sup>See the comment at SC 1 for deficiencies in the Classics. In the comments at chapters 55, 109, and 124, Ssu-ma describes individuals whose ordinary appearances belied their uncommon characters.

<sup>21</sup>See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987), 27-28.

<sup>22</sup>See SC 130.3297-3300, translated in Watson, *Grand Historian*, 50-54.

hind their successes and failures, their rises and declines, making in all 130 chapters. In addition, I wished to study the relationship of heaven and man, and to penetrate changes both ancient and modern, thus establishing the discourse of a school of thought.<sup>23</sup>

Ssu-ma Ch'ien's comments in the *Shih chi* are usually interesting, but uneven. At times he passes judgments or notes moral lessons (often citing a Confucian aphorism or a proverb), but at other times he remarks on his sources and methods, or he might add an additional anecdote, or lament a particularly tragic turn of events, or cite a personal experience, or obliquely criticize contemporary politics. His personal comments are, in short, very personal, and follow no fixed pattern. They seem inadequate to serve as the basis for establishing a school of thought, though as we will see later, they do contain important hints.

Third, this view of the *Shih chi* relies on a distinction between "objectivity" and "interpretation" that reflects the arguments of 19th and 20th century Western historians more than Ssu-ma's own worldview. Using these concepts, one is eventually led to R. G. Collingwood's distinction between "cut and paste" history and "scientific" history, and in his terms, one asks whether Ssu-ma Ch'ien is trying to prove moral theses in the *Shih chi*, or asking questions of history in an attempt to determine what actually happened.<sup>24</sup> The answer is that Ssu-ma is doing both, without any sense of contradiction.

### *Reconciling Objectivity and Interpretation*

We will begin with Ssu-ma Ch'ien's description of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* in Confucius' biography:

Confucius said, "Alas! Alas! A gentleman is distressed when he leaves this world without a praiseworthy reputation. Since my teachings are not advancing, how can I manifest myself to future generations?" Thereupon, he drew on the historical records and made the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, beginning with Duke Yin [of the state of Lu] and ending with Duke Ai's fourteenth year, twelve dukes in all. He gave prominence to the state of Lu, he was affectionate to Chou, he relegated Yin to the past, and he utilized the Three Dynasties.

He arranged its language to give it broad implications. For example, though the rulers of the states of Wu and Ch'u called themselves "kings," the *Annals* criticized them by referring to them as "viscounts." Chou's Son of Heaven was actually summoned to the assembly at Chien-t'u, but the *Annals* concealed this fact with the entry "The King of Heaven went hunting at Ho-yang."<sup>25</sup> Confucius employed these sorts of devices to regulate his own generation. As for his principles of criticism and condemnation, future kings should uphold and extend them. When the principles of the

<sup>23</sup>*Han shu* 62.2735. Ssu-ma Ch'ien did not consider his "school of thought," *chia* 家, to be entirely new. The word *chia* also means "family," and the ambiguity of the phrase reflects the fact that although Ssu-ma's approach to history was innovative, he also drew on the earlier conceptions of his father and Confucius.

<sup>24</sup>R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 257-258, 269, 278-282.

<sup>25</sup>Since it was improper for a mere duke to summon the King of Heaven (i.e., the King of Chou), Confucius used the principle of *hui* 諱, "avoidance" or "taboo." According to the *Kung-yang* commentary, this means that Confucius deliberately omitted references to the faults of those who were honorable, virtuous, or were his close associates (*Kung-yang*, Duke Min, 1st year). In this case Confucius pointedly avoided referring to the weakness of the "King of Heaven," who because of his position deserved to be honored.



*Spring and Autumn Annals* advance, then rebellious subjects and usurping sons everywhere take fright.

When Confucius judged law cases as an official, his language was such as is common to people; there was nothing distinctive in it. But when he edited the *Annals*, he included and excluded very deliberately, so that the followers of Tzu-hsia were not able to improve a single phrase. When his disciples received the *Annals*, Confucius said, "In future generations, those who know me will do so because of the *Annals*, and those who condemn me will do so because of the *Annals*."<sup>26</sup>

This passage presents the standard Han dynasty view that Confucius, frustrated in his own time (he was unsuccessful in finding a ruler who would put his ideas into action), incorporated his mostly critical insights and judgments into the phrasing and structure of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Through subtlety and oblique criticism, Confucius tried to insure that this history, with his embedded philosophy, would survive into the future where someday it would be properly appreciated by sufficiently wise men. This conception significantly influenced both the writing and reading of history; Han audiences were prepared to find great meaning in nuances of phrasing and organization, and they expected historians to judge their material through the subtle assignment of "praise and blame" *pao pien* 褒貶, just as Confucius had.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien was also a victim of frustrated ambitions. Wrongly judged and humiliated by his castration after a disputation with Emperor Wu 武帝, he similarly hoped to embed his personal philosophy into a history:

In all, 130 chapters, 526,500 words, make up the *Book of the Grand Astrologer* [an earlier name for the *Shih chi*]. I have organized and arranged it in order to gather what is lost and to repair omissions in the six Confucian Classics, thus establishing the discourse of a school of thought. This will harmonize the various commentaries on the six Classics and put in order the miscellaneous words of the hundred philosophical schools. I have hidden away one copy in a famous mountain and a second copy in the capital where they will await the sages and worthies of later generations.<sup>27</sup>

Writing the *Shih chi* was a way of ordering history, a way of making sense of the Confucian tradition, which focused on the moral interpretation of human actions. But the *Shih chi* is not simply an exemplar history in which Ssu-ma Ch'ien points to good and bad examples from the past and illustrates their respective consequences. There is a genuine tension between actual and ideal history, which Ssu-ma's new philosophy of history must accommodate. And this is the real subject of the first of the collected biographies, which is not a biography at all, but rather a sustained meditation on historiographical issues.

*Shih chi* 61 is ostensibly about Po I 伯夷 and his brother Shu Ch'i 叔齊, two hermits who chose to starve to death rather than acknowledge the legitimacy of a new dynasty (an admirable thing in Chinese traditional morality).<sup>28</sup> Ssu-ma Ch'ien begins by lamenting the omissions and contradictions in his sources (the story of Po I and Shu Ch'i fits in here), and then suddenly he launches into another train of thought with the observation:

<sup>26</sup> SC 46.1943-1944.

<sup>27</sup> SC 130.3319-3320.

<sup>28</sup>This chapter has been translated by Watson in *Grand Historian*, 187-190.

Some people say "The Way of Heaven is without favorites; it always rewards the virtuous." But if this is so, can we say that Po I and Shu Ch'i were virtuous or not? They cultivated goodness and purified their actions, as we have seen, and then they starved to death.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien contrasts the examples of Yen Hui 顏回, Confucius' favorite disciple, who lived in constant poverty and then died at an early age, and the Robber Chih 盜跖, a thoroughly evil and vile fellow who nonetheless lived out his long life contentedly unpunished. Ssu-ma continues by noting that even in recent times there are those who break all rules and live immoral lives of happiness, success, and prosperity, while it is impossible to number those who are always careful to do the right things and yet meet calamity and disaster. He confesses, "I am very confused by all this; is the so-called Way of Heaven true or false?"<sup>29</sup>

This was indeed a distressing issue to Ssu-ma Ch'ien since he believed that we live in a moral universe where the good generally prosper and the wicked eventually suffer. He accepted the Chinese tradition of didactic history whose primary function was the teaching of moral principles, and history without morals, or history that was false to moral reality, would have been meaningless.<sup>30</sup> Yet he was honest enough as a historian to acknowledge that injustices of the kind described above were pervasive, and indeed they show up often in the *Shih chi*.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien goes on to argue that while individual justice is often impossible within a person's own lifetime, the hardships a virtuous man must endure will enable the sages of later generations to recognize him and justify his life through history, thus rescuing him from obscurity or an undeserved evil reputation (this is the same process to which Ssu-ma entrusted his own reputation). So also will the sage-historian render evil to the evil. Ssu-ma Ch'ien's model in this endeavor was Confucius, who rescued Po I and Shu Ch'i from historical oblivion. Therefore, though the short-term perspective makes the Way of Heaven, which "always rewards the virtuous," look ridiculous, over a long enough period of time history does indeed validate the Way of Heaven, for Po I and Yen Hui have been justified, while the name of Robber Chih has become a proverbial symbol of wanton wickedness. The implication is that given enough time, history will adequately demonstrate all true moral principles. But this solution does depend on the continuing efforts of wise historians.

Thus in the first biography (which serves as an introduction to the entire biographical section), Ssu-ma Ch'ien confronts the issue of moral injustice and raises the possibility of eventual justification through history. The historian is seen as an active participant in this moral endeavor, and Confucius is taken as the exemplar. By now it should be apparent that the Western notion of a dichotomy between objectivity and interpretation is inadequate for the *Shih chi*. Ssu-ma believed that moral principles were woven into the fabric of the universe, and that ethical violations had repercussions in both the human and natural world. For example, a political leader might fall because of arrogance, inability to heed counsel, or oppression of the common people, and similarly, droughts and other disasters were regarded as Heaven's natural response to gross immorality in the human world.<sup>31</sup> This belief in natural, moral causa-

<sup>29</sup> SC 61.2124, 2125.

<sup>30</sup> See Ronald Egan, "Narratives in *Tso chuan*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 37 (1977): 326-329.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Tung Chung-shu's 董仲舒 (179? - 104? B.C.) writings on this subject, in Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, translated by Derk Bodde, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 2:55-58. Note that in Chinese thought, this type of response does not depend on the existence of an

tion dissolves the distinction between objective accuracy and moral interpretation, since a completely accurate account would fully demonstrate natural moral principles. One could thus, at least theoretically, pursue both didacticism and objectivity at the same time.

Yet Ssu-ma Ch'ien was acutely aware that the historical records did not always demonstrate the natural correlation between morality and human success. He was perplexed by situations which seemed to subvert the doctrine that the good should prosper while the wicked suffer, but the key word here is "seemed," for he believed that contrary instances are often due to our incomplete grasp of the situation. A perfect knowledge of historical facts would validate all natural principles, including those of a moral nature, and ideally, an objective delineation of cause and effect will always demonstrate the "Way of Heaven." Historical injustices are often only apparent, and the remedy is either more accurate history or a more accurate grasp of the moral principles involved, but again, it requires the efforts of a sagely historians make this clear, for despite Watson's protestations, the facts of history, recorded just as Ssu-ma found them, did not "[tell] a story sufficiently interesting and instructive."

#### *The Shih chi Form as a Hermeneutical Tool*

How does Ssu-ma Ch'ien reconcile the facts of history with his ethical vision? How does he improve on Confucius' model (since he not only continues the *Annals*, but also entirely reworks the Spring and Autumn period)? Ssu-ma adopts a flexible hermeneutic in which he sometimes refines his moral theories in light of historical actualities, while in other passages he redacts texts containing historical data according to his understanding of natural morality. The goal of both processes is to bring historical and moral causation into their expected alignment. Both aspects of his historical method deserve close attention, and we will begin by noting some of the personal comments that conclude most *Shih chi* chapters.

Though Ssu-ma Ch'ien has a broad notion that the good should prosper and the wicked suffer, the specifics of this rule, especially as they involve particular virtues and vices, are not clear to him. He does not want to affirm laws so much as discover them, and his direct comments reveal him constantly probing various aspects of history. There is a tentative nature to Ssu-ma's comments in *Shih chi*. As I noted above, his comments are quite heterogeneous; sometimes they express moral judgments or interpretations (not always about the central events of the chapter), while at other times they deal with historiographical issues or simply express a personal reaction to the narrative. Ssu-ma Ch'ien may highlight different connections and themes, but he does not write like a man who is sure of what he is after. Not every chapter makes a moral point, and many obvious injustices go by unremarked. Furthermore, Ssu-ma offers contradictory explanations, proposes theories only to drop them later, and often admits perplexity and wonder. He is obviously moved by the circumstances he recounts, but he is struggling to make sense of them.

We see this, for example, in his handling of Liu Pang's 劉邦 (d. 195 B.C.) startling rise to power. Liu (known posthumously as Kao-tsu 高祖), unlike other

early Chinese rulers, was a commoner, and his ascension as the first emperor of the Han dynasty came as a surprise to many, especially to his former companions-in-arms who racked the early dynasty with their revolts. In some comments, Ssu-ma suggests that Liu's fellow rebel and rival Hsiang Yü 項羽 alienated the feudal lords and turned them to Liu, who was kind and just by comparison. But elsewhere, Ssu-ma notes the policies of the oppressive Ch'in government that played into Liu's hands, or the critical contributions made by Liu's generals and advisors. There are also comments where Ssu-ma despairs of a rational explanation and concludes that it must have simply been the will of Heaven. Finally, in the comment which concludes Liu's own biography, Ssu-ma presents a cyclical model of dynastic evolution in which a dynasty characterized by good faith declines and is replaced by a dynasty of piety, which in turn gives way to a refined dynasty, which is then superseded by another good faith regime. Liu Pang obviously succeeded because he conformed to this pattern.<sup>32</sup>

Which of these explanations is right? Which is even Ssu-ma Ch'ien's best guess? We have no way of knowing, for Ssu-ma offered no final summation.<sup>33</sup> The last explanation, however, is particularly revealing. It has occasionally been quoted as Ssu-ma Ch'ien's grand theory of history, but Ssu-ma himself never mentions it again.<sup>34</sup> Nor does he attempt to fit his history to this cyclical pattern. Ssu-ma's approach here differs from that taken by most of his contemporaries. The political and philosophical theorists of his day used historical examples copiously, but they began with their theories and arranged historical facts to illustrate their points. Ssu-ma, on the other hand, starts with historical facts and tries to make sense of them. His culture has provided a basic moral orientation, but he is willing to entertain a variety of specific explanations, and he expects other historians to refine and continue his work.<sup>35</sup>

Besides modifying his interpretations, Ssu-ma Ch'ien also reconciles history and ethics by carefully adjusting his presentation of the facts to fit his moral ideals. This is not as pernicious as it sounds. As noted above, Ssu-ma felt that apparent injustices in history could frequently be attributed to incomplete knowledge, so the solution is often simply more data. Thus in many of his direct comments he rights seeming injustices by directing our attention to overlooked, but crucial facts which significantly modify the original situation. For example, he sometimes notes genealogical details (in the belief that moral virtue and its rewards may be inherited), posthumous influence, close attention to beginnings and ends (events may have a different significance in a broader context), unfavorable times (which reduced one's opportunities for brilliant, Confucian government service), or he offers revised asses-

<sup>32</sup>These various explanations are contained in the comment sections of chapters 7, 8, 16, 55, 56, and 99. See also Ssu-ma's brief description of Liu Pang's biography at SC 130.3302.

<sup>33</sup>It has been suggested that Ssu-ma's Ch'ien's comments at the end of Liu Pang's biography are an example of Ssu-ma's general reluctance to point out a person's faults in his own biography (though such faults are often readily apparent in other chapters). This tendency, first noted by the Sung scholar Su Hsün 蘇洵 (1009-1066), often seems to be a factor in the distribution of data among *Shih chi* chapters, but I am not sure that this reluctance extends to Ssu-ma's personal comments. At chapters 7, 68, 76, 89, 92, 101, 107, and 118, the remarks all directly criticize the subject of the biography. Of course, criticizing the founder of one's dynasty would have been a particularly delicate matter. See Su Hsün, *Chia-yu-chi* 嘉祐集 (*Ssu-pu pei-yao* ed.), 8.2b-4a; and Watson, *Grand Historian*, 96-98.

<sup>34</sup>See, for example, John Meskill, ed., *The Pattern of Chinese History: Cycles, Development, or Stagnation?* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1965), 2-3.

<sup>35</sup>See, for example, his comments in chapters 15, 17, 18, and 28.

sments of famous figures (who actually may not have been as evil as most people believe).<sup>36</sup>

But while these justifying comments are symptomatic of Ssu-ma's interpretive biases, they are only a minor sideshow, a method of tying up a few loose ends. His real interpretive work is going on at a deeper level, and is much more subtle, refined, and constant. Ssu-ma Ch'ien's genius was the invention of a historical form which allowed both fidelity to his sources and a minimum of direct authorial intrusion, and yet at the same time retained a remarkable capacity for interpretation and the delineation of cause and effect (including moral causes). The *Shih chi*'s organization combined the readability of narrative histories with the extensive historical context provided by annalistic histories, but I believe that Ssu-ma's primary purpose was to continue and refine the moral historiography of Confucius. Unfortunately, Ssu-ma himself was somewhat reticent about his intentions; his autobiographical chapter is deliberately obscure on the point, undoubtedly for political reasons.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, Ssu-ma Ch'ien's close relationship to Confucius is evident, as are the effects of arranging history into a series of basic annals, chronological tables, treatises, hereditary houses, and collected biographies.

There is a good deal of overlapping material in *Shih chi* chapters since events and individuals may figure in more than one biography, and this feature gives Ssu-ma Ch'ien narrative (and interpretive) options not available to writers of earlier histories. While all historians must make decisions about what to include and what to omit, Ssu-ma's format is unusual in that many excluded details do not simply disappear from his record, nor are they relegated to footnotes. Instead, they appear in other chapters, where they are granted full descriptive and explanatory status. Thus, the biographies of Lord Meng-ch'ang 孟嘗君 and Prince Wu-chi of Wei 魏公子無忌 (*Shih chi* 75 and 77) are filled with anecdotes about the ability of these officials to gather followers and recognize men of talent. Indeed, these are the qualities that Ssu-ma comments on in his concluding remarks. Yet these men were historically significant for other reasons, and other chapters include the stories of how Meng-ch'ang dangerously overextended Ch'i in its attacks on Ch'u and how Prince Wu-chi tried to advise the king of Wei.<sup>38</sup> By shifting such details into other chapters, Ssu-ma Ch'ien can focus our attention on particular characteristics of individuals, while still providing a more complete perspective.

Another type of focusing is manifest in one of the earliest biographies, that of Wu Tzu-hsü 伍子胥 (c. 500 B.C.).<sup>39</sup> Toward the end of Wu Tzu-hsü's life a new king ascends the throne, and Wu warns him that before all else he must deal decisively with the hostile state of Yüeh 越. The king ignores this advice and makes peace with Yüeh. Later Wu Tzu-hsü repeats his counsel, which is again ignored as the king di-

<sup>36</sup>For examples, see the comments in chapters 15, 17, 19, 41, 47, 69, 76, 91, 101, 103, and 124.

<sup>37</sup>Compare SC 110.2919 where Ssu-ma Ch'ien reports that contemporary politics also forced Confucius to conceal his intentions and judgments.

<sup>38</sup>SC 79.2409 and 44.1857-1862. Note also Ssu-ma's comments at SC 44.1864 where he tries to correct current notions of Wu-chi's political importance.

<sup>39</sup>*Shih chi* 66 has been translated by Richard Rudolph in "The *Shih chi* biography of Wu Tzu-hsü," *Oriens Extremus* 9 (1962): 105-120; and by Burton Watson in *Records of the Historian: Chapters from the Shih chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 16-29. Note that the latter is essentially a one-volume abridgement of Watson's two-volume *Records of the Grand Historian* (with the addition of five new chapters dealing with pre-Han history). For an analysis of the sources used by Ssu-ma Ch'ien in this chapter, see David Johnson, "Epic and History in Early China: The Matter of Wu Tzu-hsü," *Journal of Asian Studies* 40 (1981): 255-271.

rects an attack on Ch'i 齊. When Wu's pleas are rejected yet a third time, he in desperation sends his son to another state to avoid the impending disaster. Wu is denounced by an old enemy for this act of disloyalty, and as a result the king orders Wu to commit suicide, which he does after prophesying one last time of future catastrophe. Twelve years later his state is destroyed by Yüeh. Ssu-ma Ch'ien narrates all this in about fifty sentences, giving little else besides the thrice-repeated warning and death of Wu Tzu-hsü, while only seven sentences separate Wu's death and the destruction of his state.<sup>40</sup>

In actuality, Wu Tzu-hsü's three warnings were given over a period of nine years, during which there were other important events and developments, several of which involved Wu Tzu-hsü (some of these are narrated in chapter 41, the "Hereditary House of Kou Chien, King of Yüeh"). So also the twelve years between Wu's death and the fulfillment of his grim prophecy were filled with significant factors and individuals, all unmentioned in this chapter (chapter 31, the "Hereditary House of Wu T'ai-po," provides more information, as does chapter 14, the chronological table which covers this period). By omitting many details and shifting others into different chapters, Ssu-ma Ch'ien has telescoped the facts into a cohesive, unified, powerful narrative. In addition he has highlighted a particular chain of cause and effect—Wu Tzu-hsü's state was destroyed because they rejected his counsel. Such editorial shaping would have been awkward or impossible in a history based on strict chronology, and this is precisely where Ssu-ma Ch'ien's creation surpasses Confucius' original model of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, as well as the *Tso chuan*.

These types of editing techniques can also be found in Ssu-ma Ch'ien's chapters on contemporary figures, such as "The Biographies of Chi An 汲黯 and Cheng Tang-shih 鄭當時" (*Shih chi* 120).<sup>41</sup> This chapter delineates its subjects through a series of parallel stories, as follows:

1. Opening identification of Chi An (including courtesy name, birthplace and ancestors)
2. Two stories illustrating his wisdom
3. Two general descriptions (one of his Taoism and the other of his outspoken uprightness)
4. Two stories illustrating his strict uprightness (the first reports his actions and the second recounts his speech as he directly criticized the Emperor)
5. Two stories illustrating the Emperor's respect for Chi An (the first reports a remark of the Emperor, the second reports his behavior)
6. Three conflict stories (in each of which Chi An rebukes a high government official for his harshness in applying the law)
7. A transfer to another post (initiated by Kung-sun Hung 公孫弘, his opponent in the last of the three stories directly above)
8. Two stories illustrating Chi An's political acumen
9. Three direct criticisms of the Emperor (in each of which the response is described with the identical phrase—"the Emperor remained silent" 上默然)
10. Dismissal from government (due to a minor legal infraction)
11. Recall
12. Warning to a fellow official (including a prediction which eventually comes true)
13. Final promotion and death

<sup>40</sup>SC 66.2178-2181. The sentence count here is taken from the Chung-hua shu-chü punctuated edition, but sentences in Chinese bear only a loose relation to sentences in an English translation.

<sup>41</sup>Chapter 120 has been translated by Watson in *Grand Historian*, II: 343-356.

14. Postscript (short notices of the careers of various officials who were either related to Chi An, or who came from the same region)
15. Opening identification of Cheng Tang-shih (including courtesy name, birthplace, and ancestors)
16. Two descriptions (of Cheng's love of friends and Taoism)
17. Career and demeanor (general descriptions, with one specific story of an encounter with the Emperor)
18. Downfall and reappointment
19. A comparison of Chi An and Cheng Tang-shih (noting that both were upright, lost their positions in middle age, were abandoned by friends, and finally died in the provinces)
20. Ssu-ma's personal comments (on the inconstancy of friends)

In this chapter, the anecdotes are carefully arranged into a literary pattern, replete with parallels, repetitions, contrasts, and increasing tensions. These are especially evident in Chi An's biography, but Cheng Tang-shih's life, with his congenial, popular style, provides both a contrast to Chi An's blunt criticisms and a parallel, as Ssu-ma explicitly points out. The chapter on Chi An and Cheng Tang-shih is obviously a polished literary piece in which Ssu-ma Ch'ien has highlighted certain characteristics and themes, but the structure of the *Shih chi* allows him to do this without sacrificing his commitment to historical accuracy. The anecdotes concerning Chi An are recounted in chronological order, despite their parallel arrangement, because Ssu-ma has shifted other stories into different chapters.<sup>42</sup> Even more telling, the one detail which would have disturbed the literary unity of the chapter, namely the fact that Chi An and his rival Kung-sun Hung had earlier worked together very effectively, is placed in Kung-sun's biography.<sup>43</sup>

A few observations may be in order. First, despite the explicit explanation of how Chi An and Cheng Tang-shih were alike, Ssu-ma Ch'ien generally prefers to let his readers discern parallels and contrasts on their own. In fact the *Shih chi*'s form, which includes numerous dual and group biographies, seems at least partially designed to encourage this type of reading and analysis. Ssu-ma Ch'ien's reluctance to comment directly is also born out by his tendency to quote other people's judgments on the subjects of his biographies. In chapter 120 we read opinions of Chuang Chu 莊助, the Emperor, and the King of Huai-nan 淮南王 on Chi An, and we are forced to evaluate the reliability and implications of these remarks without comment from Ssu-ma.<sup>44</sup>

Second, Ssu-ma Ch'ien is often interested in themes which relate to his own life. The arrangement of the historical data in chapter 120 highlights the issue of how to advise an emperor honestly, effectively, and safely. Ssu-ma was fascinated by Chi An's life because Chi, unlike Ssu-ma himself, was successful in directly criticizing the Emperor. And this emperor was none other than Emperor Wu, the same ruler who ordered Ssu-ma's punishment when he ventured a forthright criticism.

Finally, Ssu-ma's wide latitude in selecting and arranging information allows him to use contexts to suggest the significance or causation of historical events. For example, in Chi An's biography, his demotion in section ten was officially ascribed to a legal problem, but Ssu-ma's placement of the story suggests that Chi was actually

<sup>42</sup>See SC 24.1178, 29.1409, and 112.2950-2951.

<sup>43</sup>SC 112.2950.

<sup>44</sup>SC 120.3107, 3109. Note that although this last quotation does not mention Chi An by name, Ssu-ma's introduction of the King of Huai-nan's remarks makes it clear that Chi An is the subject. See also Allen, 41-42.

dismissed as a direct result of his deteriorating relationship with the emperor. In addition, the structure of the chapter itself hints at Ssu-ma's own judgments. Cheng Tang-shih's style of diplomatic accommodation contrasted strongly with Chi An's brash, perilous outspokenness, and the fact that both men's careers followed the same general path would seem to indicate that both styles are acceptable, or that direct criticism is at least no more dangerous than mild deference. Yet Ssu-ma Ch'ien's granting much more space and detail to Chi An betrays a preference for strict admonishment. The preference is particularly apparent given the political importance of the two men: Cheng Tang-shih was probably the senior of the two (judging from the fact that he gained high office six years before Chi An), and he held the higher position.<sup>45</sup>

These patterns hold throughout the *Shih chi*, where Ssu-ma's narration is almost always sparse, chapters focus on issues such as loyalty, suicide, and literary creation, and our reading is guided by a flexible, complex, multilayered structure. But Ssu-ma's touch is light; the *Shih chi* does not go in for heavy-handed didacticism. Rather, it appears that Ssu-ma is demonstrating a method of reading history, of making connections and discovering meaning. Ssu-ma does not often insist on a particular interpretation; he invites his readers to think and rethink along with him, and as a result, it is frequently difficult to ascertain just what he may have intended by a particular presentation, or how much liberty he has taken in his arrangement. Fortunately, the *Shih chi* provides two types of tests by which we can more accurately determine the relationship between historical facts and literary presentation: parallel accounts and modified sources.

#### *Parallel Accounts*

As we have seen, Ssu-ma Ch'ien frequently distributes his material about a particular individual over several chapters. There are also cases in which the same incident is narrated more than once, and these passages indicate just how much flexibility Ssu-ma's conception history allows him in his editing and writing. It turns out that sometimes the stories are retold from different perspectives, with different meanings.

For example, the story of Ho-lü's 閻 閻 coup in the state of Wu in 515 B.C. is narrated in three separate chapters, and the different contexts help readers to perceive the same event in different ways. In chapter 66, the "Biography of Wu Tzu-hsü," the coup appears to be an opportunistic move by a treacherous man (and we are not surprised to see his younger brother try the same feat later).<sup>46</sup> Yet the fuller details of court politics in chapter 31, the "Hereditary House of Wu," provide Ho-lü with a deeper motivation as the loser in an irregular succession, and his deeds seem more justifiable.<sup>47</sup> Finally chapter 86, "The Biographies of Assassin-Retainers," narrates Ho-lü's coup in the greatest detail. The account is based on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and it is compatible with the previous two tellings. Nevertheless, the fact that this tale is included in a chapter devoted to heroes such as Yü Jang 豫 讓 and Ching K'o 荆 軻 encourages readers to see Ho-lü's coup as an example of bold, decisive action, and from this perspective it appears worthy of admiration.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup>*Han shu* 19B.770-775.

<sup>46</sup>SC 66.2174, 2177; see Watson, *Records of the Historian*, 19-20, 23.

<sup>47</sup>SC 31.1449, 1461-1463; for a translation see Chavannes, 4:6, 15-21.



In conjunction with differing contexts, Ssu-ma's selective inclusion and placement of details also affect the way we understand events. An example from Han foreign relations illustrates this. Chao T'o 趙佗 (d. 137 B.C.) was a magistrate and military commander during the Ch'in dynasty, but when the uprisings began he took advantage of his position and conquered the barbarian nation of Southern Yüeh 南越, setting himself up as king. Though Chao T'o eventually agreed to give allegiance to the Han dynasty, he still entertained great ambitions, and arrogated to himself the title "emperor" 帝, the imperial carriage style, and the term "edicts" 制 for his proclamations (in this way he intended to prove himself the equal of the Han emperor). In the "Basic Annals of Emperor Wen" we learn how Wen responded to this affront with kindness and leniency, with the result that Chao T'o was shamed into renouncing his pretensions.<sup>49</sup> Then in chapter 97, "The Biographies of Li I-chi and Lu Chia," we learn that it was actually Lu Chia 陸賈 who, as ambassador to Southern Yüeh, persuaded Chao T'o to give up his arrogant ways.<sup>50</sup> In both chapters Chao's repentance is used to illustrate the virtues of the protagonist—Emperor Wen's gentleness and high morality, and Lu Chia's diplomatic abilities.

What Ssu-ma Ch'ien neglected to mention was that Chao T'o's change of heart was more apparent than real. We learn in chapter 113, "The Biography of Southern Yüeh," that in the privacy of his own kingdom Chao T'o continued to carry on just as before.<sup>51</sup> Ssu-ma has edited his accounts to make certain points, or to give specific impressions, yet it is not a question of deliberate deceit. After the brief notice of Lu Chia's diplomacy in chapter 97, Ssu-ma openly refers his readers to the fuller account at chapter 113. This is simply another case of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's balancing of accuracy and interpretation, and the form of his history, combined with his active editing, allows him to fulfill both ideals.

I will offer one more example of parallel accounts. In the "Hereditary House of Prime Minister Ch'en" (ch. 56), we learn that Ch'en P'ing 陳平 (d. 178 B.C.) yielded his position as Counselor-in-chief on the Right to Chou Po 周勃 (d. 169 B.C.) when Emperor Wen inherited the throne. A short time later the new Counselor-in-chief, Chou Po, was terribly embarrassed at not being able to answer the Emperor's specific questions on the administration of the empire. Finally Ch'en P'ing intervened and explained the general managerial nature of the Counselor-in-chief's duties. Ssu-ma Ch'ien continues:

Because of this, Chou Po realized that his abilities were far inferior to Ch'en P'ing's. A short time later Chou Po pleaded illness and asked to be excused from his post, and Ch'en P'ing again became Counselor-in-chief.<sup>52</sup>

By juxtaposing these two sentences, Ssu-ma implies a clear causal relationship.

Yet in chapter 57, "The Hereditary House of Chou Po," we read that after Emperor Wen ascended the throne he appointed Chou Po Counselor-in-chief on the Right (with no mention of Ch'en P'ing's resignation), and a month or so later someone pointed out to Chou that his extreme good fortune might lead to disaster (since

<sup>49</sup>*Tso chuan*, Duke Chao, 27th year; SC 86.2516-2518.

<sup>50</sup>SC 10.433. See Watson, *Grand Historian*, 1:362.

<sup>51</sup>SC 97.2701. See Watson, *Grand Historian*, 1:280.

<sup>52</sup>SC 113.2970. See Watson, *Grand Historian*, 2:242.

<sup>53</sup>SC 56.2062. For more details see Watson, *Grand Historian*, 1:165-166.

in Chinese thought, extreme conditions often beget their opposites). Ssu-ma continues:

Chou Po was frightened and, considering himself in danger, he made excuses and asked to return the seals of Counselor-in-chief. The emperor allowed this, but when Ch'en P'ing died a little over a year later, he again made Chou Po Counselor-in-chief.<sup>53</sup>

These two accounts are quite different. In the first, Ch'en P'ing is the hero, while the focus remains on Chou Po in the second. But the most important difference is the exact cause of Chou's resignation. Was it because Chou Po recognized his rival's superior abilities, or was it because Chou feared the pendulum swings of fortune? Or was it a combination of both? Ssu-ma Ch'ien does not say, yet he does not seem embarrassed at offering alternate explanations; indeed the two accounts occur in consecutive chapters. Ssu-ma may have been familiar with two conflicting versions of the story, or he may have stressed different aspects of the decision in the different contexts, but in either case it is obvious that Ssu-ma Ch'ien has traced two separate lines of cause and effect for the same event. Also significant is the fact that he did not attempt to combine them or balance one against the other. Apparently each independently constituted a sufficient cause. The implication is that Ssu-ma Ch'ien regarded history as a rich, multifaceted complex of facts, and that different but equally valid meanings could be found for the same events, depending on the context of the telling. In other words, Ssu-ma seems to have realized that the same facts could be emplotted in different ways.

This interpretation of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's historiography implies a rather sophisticated view of history, but I believe that Ssu-ma's explicit comments at the end of chapters bear this out. There his remarks expressing his skeptical approach to sources and his desire to provide a foundation for future scholars indicate that he did not believe that the *Shih chi* would provide a final account of the past.<sup>54</sup> In addition, Ssu-ma often draws on the *Chan-kuo Ts'e* and its tradition of proving political arguments through citations of history. Thus in chapter 79, "The Biographies of Fan Chü 范雎 and Ts'ai Tse 蔡澤," Ts'ai attempted to convince Fan to resign from his position of Prime Minister of Ch'in by citing the examples of Lord Shang 商君, Wu Ch'i 吳起, and Tai-fu Chung 大夫種, all of whom advised their rulers conscientiously and then were executed. However, in Ssu-ma's telling of this incident (which is taken directly from the *Chan-kuo Ts'e* with little variation), Fan, "realizing that Ts'ai Tse wished to trap him by argument" 知蔡澤之欲困己以說, discussed each of these figures in turn and showed that taken as wholes, their lives were indeed worthy of emulation. Ts'ai, in reply, referred to these three individuals again to argue for his original position, and whatever the merits of their respective arguments, it is clear that Ssu-ma understood that the same historical data could be used to draw very different conclusions.<sup>55</sup>

Another illustration of Ssu-ma's sophistication in his use of contexts comes from chapter 76, "The Biographies of Lord P'ing-yüan and Yü Ch'ing." A certain Lou Huan 樓緩 was asked for advice by the King of Chao 趙. Lou's counsel was to sur-

<sup>53</sup>SC 57.2072. See Watson, *Grand Historian*, 1:431-432.

<sup>54</sup>See notes 18, 19, 20, and 35 above.

<sup>55</sup>SC 79.2420-2423; *Chan-kuo Ts'e*, 3 vols. (Shanghai: Shang-hai ku-chi ch'u-pan-she, 1985) 1:211-221. See J. I. Crump's translation in *Chan-kuo Ts'e* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 132-135 (#108).

render cities to the state of Ch'in 秦, but having just returned from Ch'in, he was afraid that his motives would be misunderstood. So he reminded the King about Kung-fu Wen-po's 公甫文伯 mother, who criticized her son for caring more about women than sagely gentlemen. Lou continued, "This spoken from a mother's lips makes her seem righteous; but if it had come from a wife, she would be merely a jealous wife. In truth the words would be the same but when the speaker is different, the attitude of the listener is changed."<sup>56</sup> This observation about the importance of context in interpretation could be applied throughout the *Shih chi*.

### Modified Sources

The second major test by which we can gauge Ssu-ma Ch'ien's freedom in balancing historical facts and literary presentation is to compare *Shih chi* accounts with their sources wherever Ssu-ma relied on already existing documents. There are some obvious difficulties with this approach. Ssu-ma may have used sources which are no longer extant, or the form of his sources may differ from our modern versions of these works.<sup>57</sup> It is often difficult to determine if Ssu-ma is paraphrasing a known source, or simply quoting another, non-extant text. And then there is the problem of the transmission of the *Shih chi* itself. Nevertheless, I believe this comparative approach is useful, even if the results will always be tentative.

Let us return to a subplot of Wu Tzu-hsü's biography (*Shih chi* 66) for an example of how Ssu-ma Ch'ien refashioned his sources. First the original, from the *Tso chuan*. This story occurs at the end of the Spring and Autumn Era, a time of intense political and military competition, and takes the form of a tragedy, relating the sorry tale of how a man sowed the seeds of his own destruction.<sup>58</sup>

Tzu-hsi 子西, a minister of the state of Ch'u 楚 about 500 B.C., wished to invite back Sheng 勝, the son of a persecuted prince who had fled the state. The Lord of She 葉公 warned Tzu-hsi that Sheng was a scheming, hot-headed young man, and predicted that disaster would come of his return. Tzu-hsi ignored this advice and recalled Sheng, who returned to Ch'u and immediately began laying plans to avenge his father's death in the state of Cheng 鄭. After several delays Sheng obtained permission to attack Cheng, but before he could do so the state of Chin 晉 attacked Cheng, whereupon Ch'u rescued Cheng and signed a treaty. Sheng was furious and declared that he intended to kill Tzu-hsi, the general who had overseen this treaty and whom Sheng now regarded as his true enemy. When Tzu-hsi heard of this, he exclaimed "Sheng is like an egg which I have hatched; I have brought him up under my wings," and he refused to believe ill of him.<sup>59</sup> A few years later Sheng

<sup>56</sup>SC 76.2373; *Chan-kuo Ts'e*, 2:692-693. The translation is from Crump, 339 (#265).

<sup>57</sup>For example, the *Shih chi* obviously draws on pre-existing accounts of the Warring States Era, some of which were arranged into the *Chan-kuo Ts'e* by Liu Hsiang 劉向 (77-6 B.C.) several years after Ssu-ma Ch'ien's death. But where *Shih chi* accounts do not match the *Chan-kuo Ts'e*, it is difficult to know whether this is due to Ssu-ma's editing, or Liu's, or problems in textual transmission (Ssu-ma's T'ang dynasty commentators occasionally refer to *Chan-kuo Ts'e* stories which are not in our modern editions, see Chu Keng-tsu 諸耿祖, *Chan-kuo Ts'e chi-chu hui-k'ao* 戰國策集注彙考 [Nanking: Hung Ku-chi, 1986], 1744-1788).

<sup>58</sup>*Tso chuan*, Duke Ai, 16th year. A complete translation can be found in James Legge, trans., *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso chuen*, 2nd ed., The Chinese Classics 5 (Oxford University Press, 1895; Taiwan reprint), 846-848.

<sup>59</sup>子西曰：勝如卵。余翼而長之。Legge's translation, 847.

did murder Tzu-hsi and attempted a coup which was finally suppressed by the Lord of She.

In the *Shih chi*, however, although the plot is the same, the focus is entirely different. While the *Tso chuan* told the story of Tzu-hsi—how he rejected good counsel, recalled Sheng, and later met death at his hands—the *Shih chi* now transforms the same events into the story of Sheng. Ssu-ma Ch'ien does this with three major changes. First, according to *Shih chi* 66, it was King Hui of Ch'u 楚惠王, rather than Tzu-hsi, who invited Sheng to return. Two other *Shih chi* chapters correctly identify Tzu-hsi as the initiator of the recall, but this change is not necessarily a direct contradiction.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps it was Tzu-hsi's idea to bring Sheng back, but King Hui issued the formal invitation. Second, Ssu-ma makes this tale less of a family affair by omitting the fact that the one who heard Sheng's threat and reported it to Tzu-hsi was Tzu-hsi's own son. And third, Ssu-ma Ch'ien modified the sense of Tzu-hsi's retort. According to *Shih chi* 66, when Tzu-hsi heard of Sheng's threat, "He laughed and said, 'Sheng is like a mere egg; what can he do?'"<sup>61</sup> This emphasis on Sheng's youthfulness and weakness blunts the *Tso chuan's* original point that Tzu-hsi himself was responsible for his own troubles.

We should note here that despite the common Western conception of the *Shih chi*, Ssu-ma Ch'ien is not directly quoting from an earlier account; he is paraphrasing. He relates the same events in the same order with many of the same phrases, so we can identify the *Tso chuan* as his primary source, but he leaves out a number of details, he alters wording, and he adds explanatory material. This sort of usage is typical of how the *Shih chi* employs the *Tso chuan*; apparently the language of the *Tso chuan* needed to be updated for Han dynasty audiences.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, it is remarkable how much freedom this allows him to transform his sources. In particular, Ssu-ma apparently felt free to modify direct discourse in order to condense, clarify, or better tailor a quotation to the narrative (since Ssu-ma is dealing with ancient history, he probably had no illusions about preserving the *ipsissima verba*; as in Thucydides, speeches are a literary device, though accuracy is not irrelevant).<sup>63</sup> On the whole, the *Shih chi* account is shorter, smoother, and more meaningful than its *Tso chuan* predecessor. It is also a different story.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien has transformed a tale of self-destruction into a story of misdirected father-avenging, which fits the overall theme of chapter 66. In fact, the context contributes to this metamorphosis. *Shih chi* 66 is constructed around two other instances of father-avenging: Wu Tzu-hsü performs this duty faithfully, while Fu Ch'a 夫差 fails in his responsibility. These two earlier examples prepare the reader to recognize Sheng's tale as a parallel case.<sup>64</sup> Ssu-ma Ch'ien also employs a chronological disjunction to reinforce his emplotments. Sheng actually dies before the Wu Tzu-hsü's state is destroyed by Yüeh, but Ssu-ma narrates Wu's story to its conclusion before returning to a point three years before Wu's execution to begin Sheng's tale (Ssu-ma notes this disjunction explicitly).<sup>65</sup> Ssu-ma Ch'ien keeps the two stories

<sup>60</sup>SC 14.675, 40.1718.

<sup>61</sup>子西聞之，笑曰：勝如卵耳，何能為也。 SC 66.2182.

<sup>62</sup>For *Shih chi* modifications of the *Tso chuan's* language, see Bernhard Karlgren, "On the Authenticity and Nature of the *Tso chuan*," *Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift* 32 (1926): 21-30; and Kamada Tadashi 鎌田正, *Saden no seritsu to sono tenkai* 左傳の成立と其の展開 (Tokyo: Daishūkan, 1963), 109-145.

<sup>63</sup>There are sometimes slight variations between parallel accounts of the same speech in different *Shih chi* chapters. On the other hand, parallel accounts of speeches are often identical.

<sup>64</sup>See Allen, 51, 57-58.

separate because had he narrated Sheng's biography within the framework of Wu Tzu-hsü's life and prophecy, the coherence, unity, and power of the latter episode would have been lost.

Despite Ssu-ma Ch'ien's relative freedom in handling the *Tso chuan*, when he uses texts whose language is closer to his own Han dynasty dialect, he often quotes almost exactly. This is characteristic of his use of materials which were later gathered into the *Chan-kuo Ts'e*. Yet even with these sources, modifications or additions can transform stories. We see an example of this in chapter 86, "The Biographies of Assassin-Retainers." There we read the story of Nieh Cheng 聶政 (d. 397 B.C.), where after a new introduction and two omitted quotations, the *Shih chi* account follows the *Chan-kuo Ts'e* with only minor variations.<sup>66</sup> Nieh agreed to assassinate the prime minister of Han 韓 for Yen Chung-tzu 嚴仲子, a man who had shown him and his mother kindness when Nieh was merely a butcher in the market. After his mother's death, Nieh tells himself, "I am ready to be of use to the man who truly knows me" 政將為知己者用 (identical in both versions). There are some differences between the accounts of the assassination itself (the *Shih chi* omits a couple of sentences about how Marquis Ai 哀侯 was also stabbed,<sup>67</sup> and the location of the slaying is different), but the interesting variations begin with the treatment of Nieh Cheng's body, which Nieh himself had mutilated before committing suicide so as not to be identifiable.

*Chan-kuo Ts'e*:

The ruler of Han had Nieh Cheng's corpse taken and exposed in the market, and he hung up a reward of a thousand pieces of gold. But a long time passed and no one knew who he was.

*Shih chi*:

The ruler of Han had Nieh Cheng's corpse taken and exposed in the market, offering a reward for information, but no one knew his identity. Thereupon, the ruler of Han hung up the reward, offering to give a thousand pieces of gold to anyone who was able to say who had assassinated Prime Minister Hsia-lei. But a long time passed and no one knew who he was.

The differences are minor, but Ssu-ma Ch'ien's added explanations clearly emphasize identity, and this theme will become even more prominent as the story progresses.

*Chan-kuo Ts'e*:

Cheng's elder sister heard of it and said, "My younger brother was a man of perfect virtue. I cannot spare myself and allow my brother's name to be forgotten. This was not his intention." Thereupon she went to Han. When she saw him, she said, "How courageous! What an abundance of spirit and modesty! In this he excels Pen and Yü and towers over Ch'eng Ching. Now he has died without leaving a reputation. His father and mother are already dead, and he has no other brothers. This is why I came. If I did not promote my brother's name because I feared for myself, I could not bear it." Then she embraced the corpse and cried over it, saying, "This was my younger brother Nieh Cheng of Deepwell village in Chih," and she killed herself on his corpse. When the people of Chin, Ch'u, Ch'i, and Wei heard it, they said, "Cheng was not the only one with ability; his sister was also an exemplary woman." The reason that Nieh Cheng's name has been passed on to later generations is because his sister risked being cut to pieces in order to promote his name.

<sup>66</sup>SC 66.2182.

<sup>67</sup>SC 86.2522-2526; *Chan-kuo Ts'e*, 2:993-1002. For translations see Watson, *Records of the Historian*, 50-54; and Crump, 455-458 (#383).

<sup>68</sup>Perhaps Ssu-ma omits this to avoid serious chronological difficulties. According to *Shih chi* 16.711 and 719, twenty-six years separate the assassinations of Prime Minister Hsia-lei and Marquis Ai.

*Shih chi*:

Cheng's elder sister Jung 榮 heard that someone had assassinated the prime minister of Han, but the murderer had not been dealt with because no one in the kingdom knew his name, even though they had exposed his body and hung up a thousand pieces of gold. In tears she said, "Isn't this my younger brother? Ah, Yen Chung-tzu truly knew my brother." Then she got up and went to Han. She entered the market and the dead man was indeed Cheng. She threw herself on his body and wept with surpassing grief, saying, "This man was called Nieh Cheng of Deepwell village in Chih." . . . [Jung said] "Yen Chung-tzu discovered and honored my brother while he was still in lowly difficulties. He befriended him and showered him with generosity. What else could my brother do? Surely a gentleman will die for one who truly knows him." . . . Finally, sobbing with sorrow and grief, she died next to Cheng. When the people of Chin, Ch'u, Ch'i, and Wei heard it, they all said, "Cheng was not the only one with ability; his sister was also an exemplary woman. If Cheng had truly known his sister's determination not to merely stand by, not to mind the tragedy of exposing his bones, but rather to travel a thousand miles of terrible hardships in order to exalt his name, so that sister and brother both died in the market of Han, he certainly would not have dared to promise to serve Yen Chung-tzu with his life. Of Yen Chung-tzu it can be said that he truly knew men, and was able to obtain noble followers."

The *Shih chi* account of Nieh Cheng's sister differs markedly from the *Chan-kuo Ts'e*, particularly in the speeches, and we cannot know whether Ssu-ma Ch'ien has rewritten the tale, or whether he has quoted another, non-extant source. Yet even so, the differences are significant. In the *Chan-kuo Ts'e*, Nieh Cheng's sister is concerned about her brother's fame 名, while in the *Shih chi* version, the emphasis is on the ability of Yen Chung-tzu to recognize a man of talent, or in other words, to truly know someone. I suspect that Ssu-ma has deliberately edited the account in some fashion (either by modifying directly or interpolating another source) in order to highlight this theme since it was obviously of interest to him, and the final quotation seems to represent Ssu-ma's own judgment.<sup>68</sup> In fact, it adds another dimension to the theme since it suggests that Nieh Cheng himself had not truly known his sister.

Even where Ssu-ma Ch'ien does not modify the language of his sources, a slight change in sequence may change the meaning. For example, in chapter 75, "The Biography of Lord Meng-ch'ang" (c. 300 B.C.), we read of how Meng-ch'ang encouraged the state of Ch'in to attack Ch'i. The passage is quite similar to an account in the *Chan-kuo Ts'e*, but where the *Chan-kuo Ts'e* identifies Lord Meng-ch'ang as a representative of Wei 魏, the *Shih chi* places this story *before* Lord Meng-ch'ang fled to Wei.<sup>69</sup> That is to say, the *Shih chi* indicates that he was still a general of Ch'i at the very time he was inviting its enemies to attack and hoping for Ch'i's defeat. In fact, the *Shih chi* specifically notes that Lord Meng-ch'ang adopted this course of action because of his personal difficulties with Lü Li 呂禮, the current prime minister of Ch'i.

This chronological shift significantly changes the story. What in the *Chan-kuo Ts'e* had been simply another tale of diplomatic maneuvering now becomes a tale of expedient treason. Slight chronological discrepancies between the *Shih chi* annals,

<sup>68</sup>The theme of recognizing men of talent figures prominently in chapters 75, 76, 77, and in the narrative of Yü-jang which immediately precedes Nieh Cheng in chapter 86. In addition, Ssu-ma discusses this theme in his letter to Jen An. See Eric Henry, "The Motif of Recognition in Early China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47 (1987): 12-13. Note also that in the *Shih chi* version of Jung's story, her suicide is played down; this, of course, was another delicate subject for Ssu-ma Ch'ien.

<sup>69</sup>SC 75.2358; *Chan-kuo Ts'e*, 1:169. For a translation, see Crump, 86-87 (#80).

tables, hereditary houses, and biographies are very frequent, and most probably have no interpretive meaning.<sup>70</sup> Rather they are the result of Ssu-ma's reliance on sparse and confused sources, or it may be that Ssu-ma died before he had truly completed his historical labors. But this particular modification seems to be deliberate because it fits into one of the themes of the chapter.

The last story in the biography tells of a time when Lord Meng-ch'ang was returning to Ch'i after he had been dismissed from his post and then recalled. He was angry with his retainers who had abandoned him, but a certain Feng Hsüan 馮驩 convinced him that it was simply human nature to base one's loyalty on expediency, and Feng urged him to forgive his old followers and accept their services once again. Apparently Meng-ch'ang did just that because in his comment Ssu-ma Ch'ien notes that in his own day, the descendants of these retainers were still very numerous in the district that had once belonged to Lord Meng-ch'ang.<sup>71</sup>

### Conclusions

Ssu-ma Ch'ien was interested in reconstructing accurately the sequence and character of past events from the sources and observations available to him, yet at the same time the prominence of the Confucian model of historiography required him to identify and highlight the moral principles thought to undergird history. Ssu-ma accepted this historiographical tradition, and indeed believed that ideally his two goals of historical accuracy and ethical accuracy would converge. Nevertheless, he was very aware that the facts of history do not always demonstrate moral principles. The *Shih chi* was his attempt to reconcile history and ethics, and he accomplished this creatively by adjusting both his moral interpretations and his presentations of events. There is some direct reconciliation in the brief comments which conclude *Shih chi* chapters, but Ssu-ma's most important contribution was his invention of a new historical form which divided history into a series of basic annals, chronological tables, treatises, hereditary houses, and collected biographies.

This new, fragmented form allowed Ssu-ma Ch'ien to shape the raw data of history into coherent, meaningful narratives by condensing or displacing chronology, by emphasizing certain facts within certain contexts, by juxtaposing significant events, by varying the point of view, by implying causal relationships, and by narrating single events more than once. It is significant that Ssu-ma did not often directly comment on moral principles, preferring to let readers draw their own conclusions. The moral authority of the *Shih chi* narratives is reinforced by the apparent absence of a mediating narrator, which allows the impression that the events of history themselves demonstrate ethical patterns, but Ssu-ma's presentation certainly facilitates the identification of moral causation.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, his presentation does not absolutely determine what lessons readers will draw from his history.

The *Shih chi* provides an arena for moral hermeneutics rather than decisively proving ethical arguments. Ssu-ma expected that later historians would continue this

<sup>70</sup>The Ch'ing scholar Liang Yü-sheng 梁玉繩 (1746-1819) identified many of these conflicting dates in his *Shih chi chih-i* 史記志疑, 3 vols. (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü 1981).

<sup>71</sup>SC 75.2362-2363. This account itself seems to be a variant of that recorded at *Chan-kuo Ts'e*, 1:406, which concerns rival officials rather than unfaithful retainers. See Crump, 192-193 (#155).

<sup>72</sup>Compare Egan, 324-325, 339.

type of analysis, arranging narratives and adjusting interpretations, just as he had reworked the historical data that underlay Confucius' *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Though his ethical imperative may expose him to the charge of programmatically re-writing history, Ssu-ma Ch'ien was a conscientious historian, fully aware of the built-in safeguard to his balancing act: he was searching for moral principles with demonstrable correlations to the real world, and if he modified the facts too much, he would invalidate whatever principles he could claim to have uncovered.

The *Shih chi* is massive and complex, and to an outside observer it may appear to be undigested history: Ssu-ma Ch'ien had not yet made up his mind or had not been able to determine the true causes or combination of causes. The next step would be for him to produce a single, unified narrative which, of course, would correspond as near as possible to the events as they actually happened. But Ssu-ma did not take this step. He saw history as a vast data bank of narrative possibilities from which numerous, equally valid, stories and moral lessons could be drawn, and rather than definitively narrating history, the *Shih chi* provides a hermeneutical model for understanding history. This, I believe, is at least part of what Ssu-ma had in mind when he described the *Shih chi* as "establishing the discourse of a school of thought" 成一家之言.