

THE GRAND LORD ARCHIVIST SPEAKS

Martin KERN (Princeton University)

Abstract

Almost everything we know about Sima Qian and his authorship of the *Shiji* 史記 we know from three paratextual sources attributed to him: the “auto-postface” (*taishi gong zixu* 太史公自序) as the final chapter of the *Shiji*, the “Letter in Response to Ren Shaoqing” (“Bao Ren Shaoqing shu” 報任少卿書) addressed to Ren An 任安 (d. 93/91 BCE), and the “Grand Lord Archivist says” (*taishi gong yue* 太史公曰) statements in all but two of the one hundred and thirty chapters of the *Shiji*. In focusing on the latter statements, the present essay examines in detail the highly formulaic and rhetorical nature of their composition: the historian’s intense use of the emotive first-person pronoun *yu* 余, his frequent exclamations and rhetorical questions, his “crying” (*qi* 泣) or “shedding tears” (*chui ti* 垂涕) in response to his “reading” (*du* 讀), his perception through “observing/contemplating” (*guan* 觀) and “hearing” (*wen* 聞), and his various expressions of delivering judgment. Based on this rhetorical analysis, the essay proposes that these statements (together with the “auto-postface” and the “Letter”) construct and stage the voice and figure of Sima Qian: a persona profoundly different from the “noble man” (*junzi* 君子) who delivers judgmental statements as a paratext to anecdotes in the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳. While the historical Sima Qian may have created much of the *Shiji*, the paratextual elements of the *Shiji* have created the textual Sima Qian known to us. As the formulaic *taishi gong yue* statements configure Sima Qian as the exemplary historian both judicious and emotional, they also provide the model for “those to come” (*laizhe* 來者): Sima Qian’s ideal readers of the future.

CHAPITRE 10 L'HONORABLE GRAND ARCHIVISTE PARLE

Martin KERN

Résumé

Presque tout ce que nous savons de Sima Qian et de sa paternité du *Shiji* 史記 provient de trois sources paratextuelles qui lui sont attribuées : une “auto-postface” (“*taishi gong zixu*” 太史公自序) dans le chapitre final du *Shiji*, la “Lettre en réponse à Ren Shaoqing” (“*Bao Ren Shaoqing shu*” 報任少卿書) adressée à Ren An 任安, et les déclarations introduites par la formule “L'Honorable Grand archiviste dit” (*taishi gong yue* 太史公曰) qui concluent les cent-trente chapitres du *Shiji*, à deux exceptions près. Focalisant sur ces déclarations, cet essai examine en détail la nature hautement convenue et rhétorique de leur composition : l'emploi intensif par l'historien du pronom émotionnel de la première personne *yu* 余, ses exclamations et questions rhétoriques fréquentes, ses “pleurs” (*qi* 泣) ou “larmes versées” (*chui ti* 垂涕) en réaction à sa “lecture” (*du* 讀), sa perception par “l'observation/contemplation” (*guan* 觀) et “l'écoute” (*wen* 聞), et l'expression des divers jugements qu'il porte. Sur la base de cette analyse, l'essai soutient que ces déclarations (de même que l’“auto-postface” et la “Lettre”) construisent et mettent en scène la voix et la figure de Sima Qian : un personnage profondément différent de “l'homme noble” (*junzi* 君子) qui prononce ses jugements dans le paratexte des anecdotes du *Zuo zhuan* 左傳. Même s'il est possible que le Sima Qian historique ait créé une grande part du *Shiji*, c'est le paratexte du *Shiji* qui a créé le Sima Qian textuel que nous connaissons. Tandis que les formules déclaratives introduites par *taishi gong yue* construisent la figure d'un Sima Qian historien exemplaire, à la fois réfléchi et émotionnel, elles servent aussi de modèle pour “ceux à venir” (*laizhe* 來者) : ses lecteurs idéaux dans le futur.

Over the course of the past twenty-some years, most Western scholars of Early China interested in questions of texts and textuality have collectively left behind traditional beliefs about the authorship of Chinese “books” from the Warring States 戰國 (453–221 BCE) and early Western Han 西漢 (202 BCE–9 CE) periods.¹ The idea that almost all early Chinese books are anthologies — edited and curated compilations of texts of diverse origin, instead of the writings of single authors — is no longer controversial but accepted; so is the understanding that the Warring States philosophical “masters” (*zi* 子) are not the authors but the protagonists of their eponymous texts, who as teachers and men of superior insight are frequently staged in series of dialogs and anecdotes.² We know how much of even early medieval literature has been shaped by the efforts of editors, compilers, collators, and commentators who retrospectively arranged texts under the name of authors;³ and we surely know the same for the texts from the pre-Qin 秦 period.

We further know that many traditional views of ancient Chinese texts and their authors evolved from Song dynasty ideals projected onto the past. Polemically put, our Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) was first constructed as such during the Song dynasty.⁴ Likewise, our view of Sima Qian 司馬遷 (*ca* 145–*ca* 86 BCE) — both as a literary stylist and as an author whose writing is shaped by his personality and emotional experiences — goes back to Northern Song 北宋 (960–1127) readings motivated by *guwen* 古文 (ancient-style literature) ideals.⁵ Writers from the late Western Han all the way through the Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907) did not hold the same views of Sima Qian as a person and of the importance of reading the *Shiji* 史記 through our image of that person. Back in 2015, I commented:

1 I put “books” in quotation marks because during the Warring States period, most of the pre-imperial texts did not yet exist as the books that were organized by Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BCE) and his son Liu Xin 劉歆 (46 BCE–23 CE) only toward the end of the Western Han dynasty.

2 For discussions of authorship in early China, see (among others) Beecroft, *Authorship and Cultural Identity in Early Greece and China*; Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*; Zhang, *Authorship and Text-making in Early China*; Vankeerberghen, “Texts and Authors in the *Shiji*”; Nylan, “Manuscript Culture in Late Western Han, and the Implications for Authors and Authority”; Li, “The Idea of Authority in the *Shih chi*”; Li, “Concepts of Authorship”; Li, “The Letter to Ren An and Authorship in the Chinese Tradition”; Ke, “*Shiji* li de ‘zuozhe’ gainian”; Kern, “The ‘Masters’ in the *Shiji*”; Kern, “Kongzi as Author in the Han”; Kern, “Du Fu’s Long Gaze Back”; Jiang, *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy in Early China*, pp. 7–25; Schwermann and Steineck, *That Wonderful Composite Called Author*; Klein, “Early Chinese Textual Culture and the *Zhuangzi* Anthology”; Du, “The Author’s Two Bodies: Paratext in Early Chinese Textual Culture”; and Du, “The Author’s Two Bodies: The Death of Qu Yuan and the Birth of *Chuci zhangju*.” For a complete reconsideration of the Qu Yuan 屈原 figure as a creation out of “his” poetry, see Kern, “Reconstructing Qu Yuan.”

3 Owen, *The Making of Early Chinese Classical Poetry*.

4 Chen, *Du Fu*.

5 Klein, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song*.

In thinking about the early “Masters,” we also must once and for all abandon the traditional approach that treats the “Masters” as the personal authors of these eponymous texts. To some extent, this requires going against the accounts in the *Shiji* where such authorship is claimed in routine fashion. Yet despite the remaining occasional appeal to such received wisdom and its widely unquestioned acceptance in Chinese scholarship as well as in contemporary Western studies of Chinese philosophy, there is overwhelming evidence that most — if not indeed *all* — of our received “Masters” texts are composite works that stage their respective “Masters” rather being authored by them. I consider the vast majority of early Chinese texts to be circumscribed anthologies or repertoires of material that were not “written up” (in acts of individual authorship) but rather “edited down” (in processes of selection) into the books we now have, a process that entirely dissolves the notion of individual authorship in favor of the roles of compilers and editors. Thus, I view the *Shiji*’s strong emphasis on individual historical personalities as authors of their texts as an anachronistic representation dating to the late second century BCE, and possibly driven by Sima Qian’s personal experience.⁶

In other words, just as our Sima Qian is to a large extent the construction of later readers, our traditional pre-imperial authors are in turn those imagined and constructed by Sima Qian, and then further by Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE), Liu Xiang, Liu Xin, Wang Yi 王逸 (89–158), and others over the course of the Han dynasty. We thus face a double conundrum: as we consider Song dynasty views of Sima Qian and how they differ from Han and Six Dynasties 六朝 (222–589) views, we must also critically reflect on Sima Qian’s own views on pre-imperial texts and authors. Who is this Sima Qian we are talking about, and who is talking about earlier texts? This is not an easy question and cannot be answered in the straightforward fashion of historical positivism.

Let us briefly contemplate some features of the *Shiji* biographies before moving on to the representation of Sima Qian himself. Each chapter — or part of a chapter — has its own plot with a beginning and an end, a story narrated more or less in sequence and populated with a certain number of credible human characters, including an explicitly identified protagonist, or more than one protagonist in the case of group biographies. Some protagonists appear as important historical figures, others as exemplary human beings, yet others to personify some prevailing social or political tensions and conflicts; and then some — for example, Lao zi 老子 — have a historical existence that is utterly dubious. Each such chapter may be found compelling, some more so, some less. Elements may seem surprising or even unique: in one place, the protagonist bursts into song at the moment of his or her

demise, no matter how improbably;⁷ in another, an entire political essay or expansive literary composition is provided in a “reprint,” to use an anachronistic term. Certain events may border on the fantastical; others delightfully cross that border.

If we read one chapter, the different moments in the story appear unique. If we read a series of chapters, we recognize shared structures, schematic procedures, and modular elements: different individual biographies and narrative plots are organized in similar ways. Some of these narratives may appear more imagined than real, but they must not be implausible: they need to be modeled, in some credible way, on historical characters known or unknown but always imaginable as real — at least to the audience at the time. To some extent, all the protagonists of their own biographies are literary configurations. They each are endowed with some degree of individuality while also being shaped in generic, shared, and hence predictable and comparable ways. In their sum, the biographical chapters make for a large book containing a colorful array of characters, personal and political relationships, exemplary cases of justice and injustice, morality tales, and case studies in the human condition — all based on human imagination and experience, all more or less plausible and to some extent predictable, and all to some extent recreated if not invented. The inventions, or acts of imagination, do not need to be Sima Qian’s himself; some may have been taken over directly from his sources. In cases such as Wu Zixu’s 伍子胥 (traditional dates: 559–484 BCE), however, we notice how the *Shiji* version differs from accounts found in other sources both earlier — the *Zuo Tradition* (*Zuo zhuan* 左傳) — and later — the *Wu Yue chunqiu* 吳越春秋.

What, then, makes the biographies credible to their readers? Song dynasty and later scholars laud Sima Qian as an exemplary “ancient-style literature” stylist, yet in reality, many biographical chapters of the *Shiji* are lacking in narrative coherence. Some chapters are well crafted; others are an incoherent hodge-podge of mutually contradictory information and style.⁸ Yet it is this very lack of coherence that endows the text with credibility and authenticity: when the plot unravels, it does so because its individual elements appear to have been combined — sometimes rather artlessly so — from various sources of different kind and origin. The biographies are credible because their imperfection shows them not as newly created by Sima Qian but rather as compiled from disparate previous sources. Thus, what is lost in coherence is gained in credibility: as a rule, in the biographies Sima Qian does not seem to have “improved” on his available facts, and — for example in the Lao zi biography — he reveals his own doubts about the sources. It is perhaps this conscientious attitude

6 Kern, “The ‘Masters’ in the *Shiji*,” pp. 336–337.

7 Kern, “The Poetry of Han Historiography.”

8 Consider chapter 63, the biography of Lao zi and Han Fei 韓非 (d. 233 BCE) (“Lao zi Han Fei liezhuan” 老子韓非列傳), or chapter 84, the biography of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi 賈誼 (ca 200–168 BCE) (“Qu Yuan Jia sheng liezhuan” 屈原賈生列傳).

toward his sources that earned the *Shiji* the designation of a “true record” (*shilu* 實錄), first mentioned by Yang Xiong in his *Model Sayings* (*Fayan* 法言).⁹

There are tensions between order and disorder also beyond the biographies. Overall, the *Shiji* appears to have been organized according to a certain plan, even a numerological one: the twelve initial “Basic Annals” (*benji* 本紀) — while not entirely stringent in their rationalization — provide a continuous sequence of narratives from the beginning of time to Sima Qian’s present emperor. But why are the “Five Emperors” (*wudi* 五帝) grouped together in a single chapter? Why is there a chapter on the Qin followed by another one on the Qin First Emperor (Qin Shihuang 秦始皇, r. 221–210 BCE)? Why is there a “Basic Annals” chapter on the failed rebel Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE)? Or, moving to a separate section of the text, why is Confucius’ biography ranked among the “Hereditary Houses” (*shijia* 世家)? And, back to the biographies, why were some group biographies written but not others one might imagine just as readily? We do not know, despite all the different rationalizations that have been offered over many centuries. Clearly, however, the fact that there are twelve “Basic Annals” does not appear accidental, nor that there are ten “Tables” (*biao* 表), eight “Treatises” (*shu* 書), thirty “Hereditary Houses,” and sixty-nine “Arrayed Traditions” or “Biographies” (*liezhuan* 列傳)¹⁰ that are capped, as a seventieth chapter, with the historian’s “auto-postface” (*zixu* 自序), which by Sima Qian’s time was an established way to integrate the preceding chapters into a single “book.”¹¹ This neat organization not only masks the lack of internal coherence; its numerology itself may have created the demand for chapters whose *raison d’être* can otherwise appear questionable.

There is no shortage of traditional, modern, and contemporary scholars who have identified for all of the *Shiji* a single unifying great plan attributed to its single mastermind, Sima Qian, and with that plan also the key to unlock the overall, unified meaning and purpose of the work. Yet to succeed, all such efforts must apply unduly interpretative pressure on otherwise heterogeneous textual material. In order to homogenize this material, it is not enough to explain certain things; one also must explain some others away.

9 See *Fayan*, 15.413.

10 In recent years, the translation “arrayed traditions” has gained currency for *liezhuan*, but for the purposes of the present essay and volume, I stay with the traditional “Biographies.”

11 Compare the final chapter 21 of the *Huainan zi* 淮南子, “Yao lue” 要略, as it stands outside the twenty chapters of the *Huainan zi* itself, or the “Xu yi” 序意 postface that follows the first twelve calendrical chapters of the *Lü shi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋. For various interpretations of *zixu*, see also the essay by Lee Chi-hsiang in this volume.

Sima Qian as a Textual Persona

Claims for unity depend entirely on a particular understanding of the Sima Qian persona; or, put differently, the Sima Qian persona, as the text’s “author function,”¹² is the paratextual (and metatextual) operative device to impose unity onto diversity. This device is primarily derived from three sources, all of them external to the narrative proper: the final “auto-postface”; the biography of Sima Qian in Ban Gu’s 班固 (32–92) *History of the Han* (*Han shu* 漢書) — including Sima’s letter to Ren An 任安 (d. ca 91 BCE)¹³ — that largely repeats the (auto)biographical parts of the “auto-postface”; and the *taishi gong yue* 太史公曰 (“the Grand Lord Archivist said”) statements that are affixed to almost all chapters of the *Shiji*. It is through these three sources that the *Shiji* is interpreted and tied to the Sima Qian persona. As a result, nearly everything we know about Sima Qian we know from writings directly attributed to himself.

Yet even so, we don’t know much: we know the years of neither Sima Qian’s birth nor death, and there are different accounts of whether he completed the *Shiji* preceding or following his punishment by Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE). Moreover, for centuries after the Han, the Sima Qian persona was read and understood differently from how we make sense of it today. The very fact that the letter to Ren An in *Han shu* chapter 62 has some overlap with the “auto-postface” in chapter 130 of the *Shiji* itself shows the fluidity with which the Sima Qian persona appears: what is part of Sima Qian’s reflection on the historical genealogy of suffering authors in the “auto-postface” gets reshaped in the letter as his personal complaint, with his own fate now modeled on that of the earlier author-heroes.¹⁴

Regarding the letter to Ren An, I concur with Michael Nylan, who has called it “an act of literary impersonation, a praiseworthy attempt to convey through an epistolary fiction genuine truths about Sima Qian’s imagined state of mind in his declining years.”¹⁵ In this reading, Sima Qian is not the author of the letter; instead, he is staged as that author, and by extension as the “lyric/romantic”¹⁶ author of the *Shiji* as a whole. We should not think of this act of staging or imagining as “forgery” but as a sincere attempt to capture the truth of Sima Qian’s motives; the Sima Qian of the letter is led to speak, to paraphrase Thucydides (ca 460–ca 400 BCE), in the way it was called for on the occasion.¹⁷ It is this attempt through which the *Shiji* becomes

12 Foucault, “What is an Author?”

13 Only in chapter 41 of the *Wenxuan* 文選 is the letter formally titled “Letter in Response to Ren Shaoqing” (“Bao Ren Shaoqing shu” 報任少卿書).

14 SJ, 130.3300; HS, 62.2735.

15 Nylan, “Friendship and Other Tropes in the Letter to Ren An,” p. 72.

16 Nylan, “Sima Qian,” p. 203.

17 See *Historiae*, 1.22. Hammond, *The Peloponnesian War*, p. 12.

legible in the particular way familiar to modern readers, with the author function as “the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning.”¹⁸ To read the author function in its paratextual manifestation is to interpret the text from its margins inwards.

Yet there is no paratext without a text. Sima Qian’s entire historical significance is tied to the existence of the *Shiji*. Would we have any knowledge of him were it not to account for how, why, and when the *Shiji* came into being? Who would need to know about Sima Qian were it not for the *Shiji*? Is there any further significance to his biography in the *Han shu*, which is nearly entirely comprised of the “auto-postface” and letter, both serving as paratexts to the *Shiji*? It does not matter whether or not the textual persona Sima Qian of the letter and the “auto-postface” was partly, fully, or not at all created by the historical Sima Qian. Under any of these scenarios, the textual persona that serves as the *Shiji*’s author function is but a representation of the historical person. In distinguishing the elusive historical person from what is represented in the paratextual material as Sima Qian the textual persona and voice, I use “Sima Qian” as shorthand only for the latter, but never for the former.

The single constant that runs through the entire *Shiji* is the paratextual *taishi gong* statements; it insinuates Sima Qian’s omnipresence from beginning to end. As soon as we let go of reading the *Shiji* through this omnipresent persona, we are no longer obliged to see the one hundred and thirty chapters as a single unified text. We may treat each chapter — or at least each section of the book — separately and reflect on the particular ways in which it was compiled from different source materials, and how these materials were then shaped and endowed with particular meaning by the compiler, or multiple compilers. With this, we are no longer invested in concerns over what the historical Sima Qian wrote or did not write, or which parts of the *Shiji* might belong to his father Sima Tan 司馬談 (d. 110 BCE) or some later contributors either believed to be known (like Chu Shaosun 褚少孫 [ca 105–ca 30 BCE])¹⁹ or entirely concealed. No matter how creative our methods, efforts to determine who wrote what in the *Shiji*, when so much of the text is clearly compiled from preexisting sources, must remain highly tentative; even many of the obviously later interpolations cannot easily be assigned to specific historical authors, nor are we able to identify with confidence textual additions that are not marked as such by either their anachronistic content or explicit attribution.²⁰ What

18 Foucault, “What is an Author?,” p. 159.

19 Klein, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song*, pp. 54–67, reads Chu Shaosun as a scapegoat to whom inferior parts of the *Shiji* were retrospectively attributed. Chu is mentioned as contributor in chapters 13, 20, 48, 49, 58, 60, 104, 126, 127, and 128.

20 Multiple unresolved controversies over the authenticity of individual chapters continue to exist; for a general overview of the issues, see Klein, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song*, pp. 23–76. Specific examples are also listed in Kern, “The ‘Biography of Sima Xiangru’ and the Question of the *Fu* in Sima Qian’s *Shiji*,” p. 303, n. 2.

is more, the time-honored commentarial tradition of relieving Sima Qian from the authorship of certain ideologically problematic or stylistically poor sections of the *Shiji* by attributing them to others clearly helped in “constructing and preserving Sima Qian’s soaring reputation.”²¹ Even the *Shiji* itself, when describing how other texts came into being, repeatedly informs us about the procedures of combining, selecting, abbreviating, and reorganizing earlier materials that were finally put under a single title or personal name.²²

And yet, it is through the various paratextual elements of the *Shiji* that the textual persona Sima Qian “personalizes authorship.”²³ The letter to Ren An, as observed by Wai-ye Li, “carries the momentum of voice. Its recurrent concern is the choice of speaking or not speaking, the conditions of utterance and silence, and how both can be recognized or misunderstood.”²⁴ This concern manifests itself in two interrelated sets of statements: the first about Sima Qian himself; the second about earlier authors, most prominently in the famous “genealogy of suffering authors” in both the letter and the “auto-postface.” As in the “Great Preface” (“Da xu” 大序) to the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經), authorship is here portrayed not as volitional but as inevitable: it is only in response to personal suffering that the text comes into being, and with it the very act of authorship and the figure of the author itself.²⁵ Paradoxically, it is the loss of control over one’s own voice that lends the author defined in such terms not only credibility but ultimate, unquestionable authority. Textual composition is not, with Aristotle (384–322 BCE), a technical art of “making” (*poiesis*); it is a quasi-cosmological event that occurs on its own terms, and not as the result of authorial manipulation of language. The authentic and truthful author, according to the genealogy of suffering authors, is the author who cannot but compose his text, and who becomes an author only by the force of this event. Pace Plato, he does not know how to lie.²⁶ This, of course, is precisely how Sima Qian

21 Klein, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song*, p. 67.

22 Kern, “The ‘Masters’ in the *Shiji*,” pp. 350–353 and 356–359.

23 Li, “The Letter to Ren An and Authorship in the Chinese Tradition,” p. 100.

24 Li, “The Letter to Ren An and Authorship in the Chinese Tradition,” p. 101. The problematic of speaking or not speaking, or speaking in a particular way, is, of course, deeply familiar from the Gongyang 公羊 exegesis of the *Chunqiu* 春秋. For the impossible task to sort out which parts of the text should be attributed to Sima Qian and which others to his father, see Klein, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song*, pp. 31–40.

25 Outside of the “genealogy” recorded in both the letter and the “auto-postface,” there is one *taishi gong* statement to the same effect, namely, on Excellency Yu (Yu qing 虞卿), the author of the *Yu shi Chunqiu* 虞氏春秋: “Had Excellency Yu not gone through hardship and grief, one might say that he also would not have been able to compose writings and reveal himself to later generations” 然虞卿非窮愁,亦不能著書以自見於後世云; SJ, 76.2376.

26 See Ke, “*Shiji* li de ‘zuozhe’ gainian,” pp. 58–61; Li, “The Letter to Ren An and Authorship in the Chinese Tradition,” pp. 113–123, shows how this notion reverberates throughout the subsequent two millennia of Chinese literary history.

is portrayed, or self-portrayed, in the paratextual framework of the *Shiji*. Just as Qu Yuan 屈原 (fl. ca 300 BCE) — prominently featured in the “genealogy of suffering authors” — in his *Shiji* biography is transformed from poetic hero to heroic poet,²⁷ so is the Sima Qian of the paratextual materials transformed from suffering subject to heroic historian.

The *taishi gong* Comments

As noted above, the explicitly marked *taishi gong* comments are the single near-constant that runs through the *Shiji* from beginning to end. They are included in all but two chapters of the *Shiji*, the exceptions being chapter 22, the “Annalistic Table of Generals and Famous Ministers Since the Rise of the Han” (“Han xing yilai jiangxiang mingchen nianbiao” 漢興以來將相名臣年表) and chapter 48, the “Hereditary House of Chen She” (“Chen She shijia” 陳涉世家).²⁸ Typically, the *taishi gong* comments are placed at the end of each chapter, but in a number of cases also at the beginning or somewhere in the middle. Of course we also find a narrator’s voice elsewhere, in all kinds of exclamations, rhetorical questions, and other emotional expressions, but this voice is not consistently marked; consider, for example, chapter 61, the “Biography of Boyi” (“Boyi liezhuan” 伯夷列傳) that programmatically opens the *liezhuan* section of the *Shiji* and raises fundamental questions about how to know history, what it means to write history, and how to understand the moral principles of history, that is, the “Way of Heaven” (*tiandao* 天道).²⁹

That being the case, the *taishi gong* comments deserve particular attention because they are explicitly marked as statements of an individual and presumably single voice. Since at least the seventh century, this voice has been understood as Sima Qian’s own, beginning with the Tang commentator Zhang Shoujie’s 張守節 (fl. 725–735) *Zhengyi* 正義 commentary after the very first *taishi gong* statement, the one that is attached to the first chapter of the *Shiji*, the “Basic Annals of the Five Thearchs” (“Wudi benji” 五帝本紀):

太史公，司馬遷自謂也。“自敘”傳云：“太史公曰：‘先人有言’，又云：“太史公曰：‘余聞之董生’，又云：“太史公遭李陵之禍。”明“太史公”司馬遷自號也。

The Grand Lord Archivist is Sima Qian’s self-appellation. The “auto-postface” states

27 Kern, “Cultural Memory and the Epic in Early Chinese Literature,” p. 133; see further Kern, “Reconstructing Qu Yuan.”

28 Chapter 22 is one of the “ten lost chapters” that are later replacements; see n. 34 below.

29 See, for example, Shan, “Boyi liezhuan’ zhong de gongzheng linian he yongheng linian”; Zhang, “Tiandao de shifei”; see also Klein, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song*, p. 388. As Wai-yeet Li notes, “The Biography of Boyi’ is probably the best-known example of how Sima Qian confronts one text with another, questions canonical authority, and explores the meaning and scope of skepticism and empathy”; see Li, “Knowledge and Skepticism in Ancient Chinese Historiography.”

“The Grand Lord Archivist said: ‘The former man mentioned,’” further: “The Grand Lord Archivist said: ‘I have heard it from Mister Dong,’” and further: “The Grand Lord Archivist encountered the calamity of the Li Ling [affair].” It is clear that “the Grand Lord Archivist” is Sima Qian’s giving a title to himself.³⁰

This is strong evidence — but only as long as we accept the “auto-postface” to be Sima Qian’s own writing. But is the formal appellation “Grand Lord Archivist” plausible as Sima Qian’s self-designation, considering that the title insinuates not merely a particular bureaucratic position but also relatively high status, and hence an honorific form of address? Doubts about this appear to have been voiced already in Han times, as noted in Sima Zhen’s 司馬貞 (679–732) *Shiji* commentary, and different alternatives have been offered, such as that *taishi gong* refers to Sima Qian’s father Sima Tan or that other Han writers used the term to refer to Sima Qian.³¹ While there exists no proof one way or the other, I consider it improbable that the historical Sima Qian would have used the honorific as his self-appellation; perhaps it refers to his father; perhaps some later editor shifted it from a modest “Qian said” (Qian *yue* 遷曰) to the honorific title; perhaps the comments were altogether written by someone later and meant to express either “the Grand Lord Archivist said” or, perhaps, “the Grand Lord Archivist would have said,” or “a Grand Lord Archivist would say,” or, referring to both Sima Tan and Sima Qian, “the Grand Lord Archivists said.” We do not know. What we can say, however, is this: even if “the Grand Lord Archivist” refers to Sima Qian, it refers to him not as a person but as the holder of an office. In other words, it represents Sima Qian in that function and unifies the *Shiji* under that voice.

It is therefore all the more significant that the *taishi gong* statements appear loaded with expressions of raw emotion. They include fifty-four instances of the emotive first-person pronoun *yu* 余 (one of them as *yu* 予), which in its power to express personal thought and feeling — most often relating suffering or discontent — is distinguished from the neutral *wu* 吾 or the plural *wo* 我.³² In addition, there

30 SJ, 1.47.

31 In SJ, 130.3320, n. 10, Sima Zhen cites Huan Tan 桓譚 (ca 40 BCE–ca 30 CE) as stating that the *taishi gong yue* statements were written by Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (ca 150–ca 90 BCE) who used the honorific *gong* to refer to Sima Qian. However, Sima Zhen disagrees and believes that Sima Qian himself quotes the statements from his father Sima Tan, for whom he uses *gong*. In addition, Sima Zhen cites an anonymous opinion that the statements might come from Sima Qian’s grandson Yang Yun 楊惲 (d. 54 BCE), using *gong* for Sima Qian. Similarly ambiguous is a *taishi gong* statement within the auto-postface (SJ, 130.3296), depending on how one punctuates it: it can either refer unambiguously to Sima Qian himself, or Sima Qian — who appears to call himself “the small child” (*xiaozi* 小子) here — can be quoting his father as *taishi gong*. The ambiguity is difficult to resolve; see also Klein, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song*, pp. 32–33 and 79–81, who further refers to Schaab-Hanke, *Der Geschichtsschreiber als Exeget*, p. 11, n. 35.

32 This distinct meaning of *yu* 余, while not noted in any of the standard dictionaries, can

are sixteen *wu* 吾, in most cases at the beginning of a phrase that states, matter-of-fact-like, that the speaker visited a place or, just twice, that he had “heard” (*wen* 聞) something from someone.³³ There are also thirty-six instances of the rhetorical particle *qi* 豈 (“how...!”) at the beginning of a question or exclamation (often as *qi bu* 豈不 or *qi fei* 豈非, “how not...!”), forty-six instances of the initial conjunction *he* 何/曷 (“how...?”), twenty-seven instances of the emphatic final exclamation marker *zai* 哉 (“indeed”), and forty-three instances of the final question particle *hu* 乎. There are ten *kuang* 況 (“even more so”) and twelve *bei* 悲 (“to pity, to grieve”), seven of which in the formula *bei fu* 悲夫 (“how pitiful!”). If this is the voice of Sima Qian the historical person, we can only conclude that this person, whenever being deeply touched emotionally, was consistently given to repetitive and predictable formulas. He sighs, he cries, he pities, he emphasizes his personal subjectivity with the pronoun *yu* 余, and he cannot stop asking rhetorical questions and uttering exclamations of doubt and frustration, all expressed through a limited vocabulary and formulaic code. The voice of the *taishi gong* is highly ritualized.

In this context, it is indicative that the *taishi gong* speaks not only in the chapters presumably written by either Sima Tan or Sima Qian. He also appears — sometimes with equal emotional force and emphasis — in those chapters that already in Ban Gu’s time were considered inauthentic, that is, as later replacements of originally existing texts that had been lost. Whoever composed these replacements was not shy to speak in the identical *taishi gong* voice, presumably in order to align the newly created chapters with those by the original *taishi gong* and hence to reinforce the unity of the *Shiji* altogether. It is evident that the later contributor, or contributors, considered the *taishi gong* statements an indispensable part of the chapter structure of the *Shiji*. Furthermore, early readers since Ban Gu — who were fully aware of the later substitutions — did not find this retrospective impersonation of the *taishi gong* voice problematic or worth mentioning.³⁴

nevertheless be observed consistently in early Chinese texts; see for instance the analysis of personal pronouns in the “Lisao” 離騷 in Kern, “Cultural Memory and the Epic in Early Chinese Literature.” There is but a single case of *wo* 我 in the *taishi gong* comments, but four more in quotations from other speakers; moreover, in addition to the sixteen *wu* 吾 uttered by the *taishi gong*, there are six more in quotations from other speakers. Meanwhile, no other quoted speaker quoted in the *taishi gong* comments is afforded the emotive personal pronoun *yu*.

33 For an account, including a tabular survey, of all the instances of first-person pronouns in the *taishi gong yue* statements, see Schaab-Hanke, *Der Geschichtsschreiber als Exeget*, pp. 405–428. Schaab-Hanke recognizes the distinct uses of *yu* 余 versus *wu* 吾 and speculates that these could refer to the personal versus institutional “bodies” or “identities” of the historian (as in Kantorowicz’s famous *The King’s Two Bodies*) or even to the different identities of Sima Tan and Sima Qian.

34 Here I refer to the famous case of the “ten lost chapters” whose titles were known but whose texts had been lost; see HS, 62.2724. Some but not all the replacements are attributed to Chu Shaosun. In his commentary to this passage (n. 13), the third-century commentator Zhang Yan

While given to expressions of emotion, the voice of the *taishi gong* is thus only seemingly personal or individual. Far more important, it is *exemplary*: this is how a good historian responds to what he has learned about history and how he has learned about it. To some extent — though this will be critiqued in detail below — it is also a voice, as has often been noted, that follows tradition, continuing from the *junzi yue* 君子曰 (“the noble man said”) comments mostly in the *Zuo Tradition*, but to a lesser extent also in the *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu* 國語) and various other early texts.³⁵ Like the “Grand Lord Archivist,” the “noble man” is not individual but institutional: he is an exemplary persona in which is staged not a particular historical individual but the personified model of historical judgment, a model for future generations to appreciate and emulate. Its expression of judgment is not idiosyncratic.

One aspect that distinguishes the “Grand Lord Archivist” from the earlier “noble man,” however, is that the former expresses deep emotionality; the latter never does. Yet to make sense of the *taishi gong* statements, we must not misread them as subjective or individual. The representation of emotion in early China is something quite different — not subjective but intersubjective; not one person’s response to the world but *any* perceptive human being’s response. This is abundantly clear from how emotion is treated in the “Great Preface,” already invoked above and, further, from the very term *qing* 情 used there, conventionally translated as “emotion” but that in early China denotes not just feelings or passions (let alone subjective ones) but also “facts,” “essence,” or “human disposition.”³⁶ This is what I mean by “exemplary”: the emotions expressed by the *taishi gong* are what they *should be* under the circumstances. They mark the speaker as a profoundly perceptive historian but also instruct the reader on how to think and feel, following the model not of Sima Qian the person but of the “Grand Lord Archivist,” the historiographic function. They are rules-based, performed, and staged. Like the “noble man” comments in the *Zuo Tradition*, they are both representational and didactic: representational in how

張晏 identifies the ten chapters by title; see also SJ, 130.3321–3322, n. 1, for more extensive commentary. Of the “ten lost chapters” named by Zhang Yan, only chapter 22 (noted above) is without a *taishi gong yue* statement. For an excellent study of the issue, see Yu, “Taishi gong shu wangpian kao,” pp. 1–108; see also Klein, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song*, pp. 56–67.

35 For the most recent study on the *junzi yue* 君子曰 comments in *Zuo zhuan*, with extensive references to earlier scholarship, see Kern, “Poetry Quotation, Commentary, and the Ritual Order.”

36 See the classic statement by A. C. Graham (1919–1991) on *qing* 情 in Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature*, pp. 59–65. Graham insists that *qing* in early China never means “passions,” but perhaps this misses the more interesting point: it can refer to human passions, but these passions transcend the individual subject by being expressive of human disposition in general. For a recent discussion, see Seok, “The Emotions in Early Chinese Philosophy.”

they display the voice of the ideal historian; didactic in how they guide the audience to understand history. The key difference from the “noble man” comments is rooted in the new ways in which, as noted by Wai-ye Li, authorship and the role of the historian are personalized.³⁷ In both texts, the paratextual statements signal both truth and authority, even though they are based on different sets of presumptions regarding the role and identity of the historian, and on different epistemologies.

In particular, based on the conceptual relationship between “emotion” and “fact” (both *qing*), the performative emotionality of the *taishi gong* is best understood as an epistemological category and quality: *qing* does not blind the historian’s judgment but, to the contrary, is one of his faculties for, and expressions of, perception and understanding — not an expression of subjectivity but as a quasi-inevitable response to the world shared by all humans endowed with similarly perspicacious capacities. As the historian responds emotionally to history, his readers mimetically respond to the historian’s experience as their own. This non-subjective quality of emotion is further evident from the fact that two centuries after Sima Qian, Ban Gu’s Appraisals (*zan* 贊) — statements that in the *Han shu* take the place of the earlier *taishi gong yue* statements at the end of each chapter — often speak in a similar voice, including in Appraisals that simply copy the *taishi gong*’s earlier words without ever marking them as such.³⁸

There are other elements in the *taishi gong* statements that are related to authority and truth. Consider the three activities that appear with high frequency in these comments, always with the *taishi gong* voice as the subject: to read, *du* 讀 (seventeen times), to observe, *guan* 觀 (twenty-seven times), and to hear, *wen* 聞 (twenty-seven times). We hear the *taishi gong* speak, and in his speech, we see how he perceives the world by way of reading, observing, and hearing. In other words, the *taishi gong* comments stage the historian as a reader, an observer, and a receptive listener — and only then, as a result of all this, as a writer. Remarkably, it is in the *Shiji* that Confucius himself is presented three times in that way: once in chapter 47, the “Hereditary House of Master Kong” (“Kong zi shijia” 孔子世家); once in the *taishi gong* statement that opens chapter 121, the “Biographies of the Classical Masters” (“Rulin liezhuan” 儒林列傳); and once in the *taishi gong* statement that opens chapter 13, the “Genealogical Table of the Three Eras” (“Sandai shibiao” 三代世表). All three mentions are formulaic: in the first two cases as “he relied on the records of the archivists to create the *Chunqiu*” (*yin shi ji zuo Chunqiu* 因史記作春

秋), which in the third is just slightly adjusted to “Master Kong relied on the records of the archivists to arrange the *Chunqiu*” (*Kong zi yin shiwen ci Chunqiu* 孔子因史文次春秋).³⁹

Compared to the seventeen *taishi gong* passages that show the *taishi gong* “reading” (*du*) his sources, there are only thirty-two other passages throughout the *Shiji* that mention “reading,” and of these, at least eight are known as later interpolations into the *Shiji*.⁴⁰ Nobody in the *Shiji* reads even remotely as much as the *taishi gong* does.

Reading, Sighing, Crying

Twice do the *taishi gong* comments represent him as a reader who discerns an earlier author from his texts:

余讀孔氏書，想見其為人！

When reading the writings of Master Kong, in my thoughts I see him before me as the person he was!⁴¹

余讀“離騷”、“天問”、“招魂”、“哀郢”，悲其志。適長沙，觀屈原所自沈淵，未嘗不垂涕，想見其為人！

When reading “Encountering Sorrow,” “Heavenly Questions,” “Summoning the Soul,” and “Lament about Ying,” I grieve over [Qu Yuan]’s purpose. Having traveled to Changsha and seen where Qu Yuan had drowned himself in the abyss, I never can help shedding tears, and in my thoughts I see him before me as the person he was!⁴²

Despite the display of personal emotion, marked by the initial pronoun *yu*, the two comments share a repetitive structure reserved for the cases of Confucius and Qu Yuan only: both start with “When reading ...” (*yu du* 余讀) and end with “in my thoughts I see him before me as the person he was” (*xiang jian qi wei ren* 想見其為人);⁴³ the latter appears nowhere else in the *Shiji*. Similarly, the *taishi gong* comments on Guan Zhong 管仲 (d. 645 BCE), Yan Ying 晏嬰 (578?–500 BCE), and Shang Yang 商鞅 (390–338 BCE) state how reading their writings led the “Grand Lord Archivist” to examining and describing their lives:

既見其著書，欲觀其行事，故次其傳。

After having seen how [Guan Zhong and Yan Ying] had composed their writings, I

39 SJ, 47.1943, 121.3115, and 13.487.

40 For a list and brief discussion of these, see Kern, “The ‘Biography of Sima Xiangru’ and the Question of the *Fu* in Sima Qian’s *Shiji*,” p. 308.

41 SJ, 47.1925.

42 SJ, 84.2503.

43 For further discussion of these and some of the following observations, see also Kern, “The ‘Masters’ in the *Shiji*.”

37 Li, “The Letter to Ren An and Authorship in the Chinese Tradition.”

38 Compare, e.g., the parallels in the following chapters: SJ, 9 / HS, 3; SJ, 51 / HS, 35; SJ, 52 and 59 / HS, 38; SJ, 53 / HS, 39; SJ, 89 / HS, 33; SJ, 95 / HS, 41; SJ, 96 / HS, 42; SJ, 100 / HS, 37; and SJ, 118 / HS, 44. Interestingly, wherever a *zan* in the *Han shu* copies a *taishi gong* statement, it erases the emphatic first-person pronoun. I thank Janice Ling for this observation.

wanted to survey how they had conducted their affairs and therefore arranged their biographies.⁴⁴

余嘗讀商君“開塞”、“耕戰”書，與其人行事相類。卒受惡名於秦，有以也夫！

I once read Lord Shang's writings on "Opening up Barriers" and "Plowing and Warfare," which are similar to how as a person he conducted his affairs. The ill fame he finally gained in Qin — there was indeed a reason for that!⁴⁵

Remarkably, neither the joint biography of Guan Zhong and Yan Ying nor the one devoted to Shang Yang mention any of their writings. It is in both cases only the paratextual *taishi gong* comment that presents them as authors and the historian as their reader.

The formula *yu du* ("I read") is the phrase used in the *taishi gong* comments, appearing twelve times and starting with chapter 13, while four times — all in the introductions to one of the "Tables" — the act of reading is attributed to the *taishi gong* in the third person.⁴⁶ Thrice in these passages we encounter the formula "I never can help but push the writing away and sigh" (*wei chang bu fei shu er tan ye* 未嘗不廢書而歎也)⁴⁷; twice we read "I never can help but have my tears streaming down" (*wei chang bu liu ti ye* 未嘗不流涕也) or "I never can help but shed tears" (*wei chang bu chui ti* 未嘗不垂涕)⁴⁸; and in one instance the *taishi gong* uses the phrase "he never could help but push the writing away and cry" (*wei chang bu fei shu er qi ye* 未嘗不廢書而泣也) for someone else.⁴⁹ Only once do we encounter the phrase *wu du* 吾讀 ("I read") with the less neutral (i.e., non-emotive) first-person pronoun *wu*.⁵⁰ Moreover, the *taishi gong* comments never mention the historian's "reading" in the context of the first twelve chapters, the "Basic Annals." In sum, both the act of reading and the emotional responses of "sighing," "crying," or being moved to tears are described in repetitive formulae. As a reader especially in the *liezhuan* section, the *taishi gong* is remarkably consistent.

Observing, Hearing, Judging

Much more than by "reading," the knowledge of the *taishi gong* is informed

44 SJ, 62.2136.

45 SJ, 68.2237.

46 Chapters 13, 18, 24, 31, 37, 47, 64, 68, 74, 84, 97, and 121 all have *yu du*; chapters 14, 15, 16, and 19 have *taishi gong du* 太史公讀.

47 Chapters 14, 74, and 121.

48 Chapters 24 and 84. In the *taishi gong* comment to chapter 98, the phrase "could never help but shed tears" (*wei chang bu chui ti* 未嘗不垂涕) is further used to describe the early Han statesman Zhou Xie 周繇 (d. 175 BCE) who thus showed himself worthy to be called a loyal and devoted "noble man."

49 Chapter 80; here, *shu* ("writing") refers more directly to a letter.

50 Chapter 62.

by what he has "observed" (*guan* 觀) and "heard" (*wen* 聞), with each term appearing some two dozen times. The term *guan* in particular needs to be understood beyond its seemingly straightforward translation in English. *Guan* does not simply mean "to observe" or "to watch." It means to observe something with deep and comprehensive insight, understanding, and judgment and can veer toward "to contemplate" or even "to meditate upon." Unlike other terms signifying visual perception, *guan* denotes a position of mental sovereignty in the sense that what is being observed is completely at the perceptive observer's disposal. Thus, when Jizha of Wu 吳季札 in 544 BCE, on the occasion of his visit to the court of Lu 魯, requests to *guan* the music of Zhou and is treated to a performance of poetry, song, and dance,⁵¹ he does not simply "observe the music" in a multimedia spectacle both visual and auditory. Instead, Jizha "observes" it from an elevated position of moral and political judgment as he delivers perspicacious comments on each part of the singing and dancing, complete with predictions for the polities represented in the different sections of the performance. (A more specialized meaning of *guan* is also "to divine," *zhan* 占.) Likewise, throughout the *Shiji*, historical actors *guan* "virtue" (*de* 德), the "Mandate of Heaven" (*tianming* 天命), the models of "high antiquity" (*shanggu* 上古 / 尚古), the "merits and achievements of the former thearchs" (*xian di gong ye* 先帝功業), another person's "heart-mind" (*xin* 心) or "inner disposition" (*nei* 內), "local customs" (*feng* 風), "government" (*zheng* 政), and so on. The same gesture of sovereignty of perception is performed in the *taishi gong* comments. Likewise, *wen* is more than just "to hear" in the sense of accidentally overhearing something; more often, the claim to have "heard" something is better understood as to have "learned" something, that is, either *from* a figure of authority (e.g., one's teacher) or *about* an exemplary situation from the past, especially high antiquity. To have "heard" something is akin to have "understood" (*zhi* 知) it, another crucial term in the vocabulary of historical inquiry and judgment.

How and what does the *taishi gong* "observe" and "hear"? First, there is the "observing" of texts: in chapter 1, of the *Chunqiu* 春秋 annals and the *Discourses of the States*; in chapter 12, of "the words of the masters of methods and sacrificial shrine officials" (*fangshi ciguan zhi yan* 方士祠官之言), which is a slight variation of the comment in chapter 28;⁵² in chapter 27, of the "records of the archivists" (*shi ji* 史

51 See *Zuo zhuan*, "Xiang gong" 襄公, 29.13, also retold in SJ, 31.1452–1453; see Durrant, Li, and Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition*, p. 1243. Note that, in this translation, *guan* is translated as "hear," which does not nearly capture the depth of the perception involved.

52 Chapter 12, the "Basic Annals of Filial [Emperor] Wu" ("Xiao Wu benji" 孝武本紀) was reportedly lost already in Han times and most of its content subsequently copied from chapter 28, the "Treatise on the Feng and Shan Sacrifices" ("Fengshan shu" 封禪書); see Yu, "Taishi gong shu wangpian kao," pp. 26–31. (The chapter is one of the "ten lost chapters" mentioned in n. 34 above.) The wording in chapter 28 refers to "the intentions of the masters of methods and

記); and in chapter 60, of “brilliant phrases” (*wenci lanran* 文辭爛然). “Observe” is not quite the right word here, especially since the *taishi gong* uses *du* (“to read”) so frequently. What *guan* must mean in these cases is not to “observe” or read a text but — to stay with the verb in English — to “observe” something from the text, that is, to “understand” something from it.

Remarkably, here is another major difference from the “noble man” comments in the *Zuo Tradition*: there, the “noble man” not only “says” things (as the *taishi gong* does as well), both having their statements introduced with *yue* 曰 — he also makes predictions. In a narrative form, the *Zuo Tradition* employs the formula *junzi shi yi zhi* 君子是以知 (“because of this, the noble man understood”) eleven times, in most cases predicting the future consequence of a current situation. This formula does not occur once in the *taishi gong* comments; in fact, the *taishi gong*, unlike the “noble man,” never engages in such specific prediction. While *zhi* 知 (“to understand”) appears thirty-six times in the *taishi gong* comments, it invariably refers to some factual knowledge.

Likewise, the other uses of *guan* in the *taishi gong* comments are more straightforwardly related to specific affairs: the object of *guan* can be matters such as the subtractions and additions in the ritual systems of the three dynasties of high antiquity (chapter 23), the celestial images or figures (*xiang* 象, chapter 27), irrigation works (chapter 29), the ritual paraphernalia in the Confucius Temple at Lu (chapter 47), ancient city walls (chapter 78), the place where Qu Yuan had drowned himself (chapter 84), ancient walls and fortifications (chapter 88), or old houses (chapter 95). In most of these cases, *guan* is related to the *taishi gong*’s personal travel: after he arrives somewhere, he examines specific objects and circumstances. On the other hand, *guan* can also serve — as elsewhere in the *Shiji* — to observe, contemplate, or imagine what is not or is no longer directly visible, such as the political chaos in former times (chapter 33), the actions of Guan Zhong and Yan Ying (chapter 62), the righteousness of Han Anguo 韓安國 (d. 127 BCE) (chapter 108), or the ways in which ancient generals had attracted worthies (chapter 111). In both these dimensions, the action of *guan* marks the historian’s qualities and trustworthiness: he personally visits important locations to gather information about the past, and he examines or contemplates the real or imagined traces of historical actions and events.⁵³

Similarly, what one has “heard” appears to establish some degree of credibility and authority, though clearly with less force than what one has “observed.” On

sacrificial shrine officials” (*fangshi ciguan zhi yi* 方士祠官之意).

53 For a fuller account of Sima Qian’s presentation of his methods and activities, including his travels, to verify historical facts, see Li, “The Idea of Authority in the *Shih chi*,” pp. 377–378.

occasion, the *taishi gong* has “heard” some information from a contemporary figure (chapter 7, 43, 130) or something that an earlier person had once said (Confucius in chapter 33). But in other cases, he simply “has heard” something about the past (chapters 7, 18, 61, 95), which twice he finds confusing, as expressed with the formulaic exclamation “strange indeed is what one hears!” (*yi zai suo wen* 異哉所聞, chapters 18, 95). And finally, there is “what has been heard from olden days” (*jiu wen* 舊聞, chapter 14, where it is paired with “records of the archivists,” *shi ji*), an expression that gestures at an earlier source but one whose reliability does not seem beyond doubt.

It thus appears that in presenting his credibility, the *taishi gong* puts a premium on what he has “read” and what he has “observed,” while what he has “heard” is only of a secondary order and, in fact, sometimes open to doubt. The claim to have “read” something points at his collection and examination of written sources; the claim to have “observed” something is repeatedly related to his personal travels, where he has ascertained the truth of history by visiting its locations, or — where nothing can be seen directly in person anymore — it signals profound reflection and contemplation on events past, that is, the historian’s insight and perceptivity. *Guan* refers to either act of perception. What further distinguishes both “observing” and “reading” from “hearing” is that the former are direct actions by the *taishi gong*, while “hearing” is merely the reception of information from others, not initiated or controlled by the recipient and potentially unreliable.

The mental capacity of reflection and contemplation that defines *guan* as different from just “seeing” is centrally important even where *guan* refers to visiting places, talking to people, or examining the physical remnants from the past. On the road, the *taishi gong* is not a wide-eyed tourist, nor is his fact-finding mission accidental; he knows exactly what to look for and integrates what he discovers into his larger historical understanding. In “observing,” he makes sense of what he sees; he interprets and judges the facts.

The representation of judgment is my final point here. All historiography is, by necessity, constructed not just of narratives but within the narrative structure of a cause-and-effect logic in order to be meaningful and plausible. It is, in other words, driven by judgment. But historical judgment requires justification in order to be unquestionable. In the *Zuo Tradition*, historical judgment and predictions are constantly expressed by the historical actors themselves (as opposed to the narrator), be it explicitly or in more subtle ways.⁵⁴ As a text, the *Zuo Tradition* trains its readers to make sense of the historical account not by reference to the historian but from

54 See, for example, Schaberg, *A Patterned Past*, pp. 21–56; see also the numerous speeches discussed in Li, *The Readability of the Past in Early Chinese Historiography*.

within the narrative itself — and, by extension, to accept the *Zuo Tradition* as truthful. Unlike in Greco-Roman historiography, there is no authorial voice anywhere in the text to take responsibility for this account, to claim trust and credibility, or to lay out the principles of judgment. In the *Zuo Tradition*, the metatextual function of the historian's voice is external to the text, namely, in the paratextual comments by the "noble man" and, to a much lesser extent, "Confucius." Yet these comments are merely sporadic and unevenly distributed.

In the *Shiji*, by contrast, the *taishi gong* comments are supplied systematically, appearing in all but two chapters. As noted so far, they mark the historian's voice and persona as highly personal and emotional, yet they also mark his account as factual, namely, based on his written sources, his travels, and his preceptive contemplation. Over the past two millennia, different readers have foregrounded either the personal or the factual dimensions of the *Shiji*.⁵⁵ Michael Nylan has dubbed these two readings the "social scientific" versus the "lyric/romantic."⁵⁶ Yet there is a third dimension represented in the *taishi gong* comments, and that is the judgmental. Across the "social scientific" versus "lyric/romantic" divide, the comments are laced with the rhetoric of judgment and causality: there are ninety-one *gu* 故 (mostly the conjunction "therefore," but in a small number of cases also the noun "reason"), plus another nineteen *shi yi* 是以 ("for this reason"); there are three dozen *zhi* 知 ("understand"), forty-eight *fei* 非 ("it is not the case"), and another smattering of nineteen *gai* 蓋 ("probably"). If the *taishi gong* comments contain "the soul of the *Shiji*,"⁵⁷ this soul — external to the narrative proper, and hence paratextual — is expressed in the historian's judgments. Grounded in rhetorical claims for historical causality but also in the *taishi gong*'s emotional commitment and investigative efforts, these judgments appear unassailably true and authoritative.

There are several key passages in the *taishi gong* statements that explicitly discuss his methods, and they are strategically placed. The *taishi gong* comment at the end of chapter 1, the first of the "Basic Annals," succinctly notes the efforts and doubts of earlier scholars (including Confucius and his followers), the historian's personal travels, and his principal written sources, while also allowing that not all information is consistent or equally trustworthy. Next, in his comment at the beginning of chapter 13, the first of the "Tables," the *taishi gong* praises Confucius for being circumspect when "transmitting as doubtful what was in doubt" (*yi ze chuan yi* 疑則傳疑).⁵⁸ And finally, the entire chapter 61, the first of the "Biographies,"

55 See Klein, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song*.

56 Nylan, "Sima Qian," p. 203.

57 Jian, *Shiliao yu shixue*, p. 149.

58 For a fuller account on how Sima Qian expresses skepticism to enhance his credibility, see Li, "The Idea of Authority in the *Shih chi*," pp. 391–394.

may be read as a programmatic statement by the *taishi gong* exploring the difficulties of ascertaining historical truth, reading — and questioning — written sources, resolving moral dilemmas, and writing history by way of reference to the life and fate of the individual. In this sense the chapter serves as part of the paratextual frame that bookends — together with chapter 130, the "auto-postface" — the biographical section as a whole. Clearly, these programmatic statements at the very beginning of the "Basic Annals," "Tables," and "Biographies" serve as weight-bearing elements in the architecture of the *Shiji* as a whole. They are not randomly placed; they are where they are for a purpose.

Across its principal concerns, methods, and choices of style and diction, the *taishi gong* differs profoundly, systematically, and consciously from the "noble man" in the *Zuo Tradition*,⁵⁹ which speaks to the constructed nature of both. In their basic function, both are paratextual voices of judgment and authority, evaluating history not only as a sequence of events but as a meaningful semiotic system. And yet they differ in every possible way. The *taishi gong* reads; the "noble man" doesn't. The "noble man" regularly cites lines from the canonical poems; the *taishi gong* doesn't. The "noble man," in evaluating historical events and actions, places accordance with "ritual propriety" (*li* 禮) at the center of his concerns; but *li* plays no role in the comments of the *taishi gong*. The *taishi gong* travels, investigates, and talks with people in order to ascertain historical facts; the "noble man" stays put — wherever his disembodied voice might be located — and only comments on the text. The "noble man" offers perceptive predictions as results of particular actions; the *taishi gong* shows no interest in prolepsis. The *taishi gong* is both intensely emotional and keen in his "observing"; the "noble man" knows neither how to sigh and cry nor how to "observe." The "noble man" easily falls into tetrasyllabic rhythms of speech; the *taishi gong* indulges in questions and exclamations. In sum, everything that seems centrally important to one is completely absent with the other. Each represents its own distinct and consistent voice of authority based on a well-delineated set of actions, concerns, and expressions.

The present essay is not concerned with the role the historical Sima Qian played in writing either the *Shiji* or the *taishi gong* comments. I have literally nothing to say on that topic, nor am I aware of scholarship that has succeeded in identifying in specific terms Sima Qian's own contributions to the *Shiji* without demanding us to first accept a host of dubious and unsupported a priori assumptions. Instead, I suggest that the paratextual *taishi gong* persona is highly stylized and constructed in

59 Consciously because the *Shiji* includes numerous instances that show its authors as being profoundly aware of the *junzi* commentarial function in a range of earlier texts, and above all in the *Zuo zhuan*; see Schaab-Hanke, *Der Geschichtsschreiber als Exeget*, pp. 105–138.

what it does and what it does not do. It has rules and procedures, including those to signal personal emotion. The Sima Qian of the historical imagination is the result of this paratextual construction. The distance between the historical person and the *taishi gong* paratext is one we cannot bridge and do not even understand. I am therefore invested in neither the “social scientific” nor the “lyric/romantic” nor any other Sima Qian. All of them might be considered anachronistic if we concede that neither social scientists nor romantics roamed the lanes and alleys of Western Han Chang’an 長安. To take the *taishi gong* comments as the voice of the historical Sima Qian strikes me as untenable, no matter which epistemological or psychological value we then attribute to it. The *taishi gong* as a paratextual function is constructed to unify the *Shiji* as a single text and to guide the reading of that text from a particular perspective. Meanwhile, the retrospectively psychologized Sima Qian as the author of the *Shiji* imposes — proving Foucault right — severe limits and opportunity costs on our engagement with the text itself. Letting go of the conflation of historical author and paratextual voice — including where this voice is occasionally woven into the main text itself — we may find new ways of reading the *Shiji* as both history and literature.

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