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Views from Within, Views from Beyond:
Approaches to the *Shiji* as an Early Work of Historiography

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Introduction

For two millennia, the *Shiji*, truly a masterpiece of historiography and literature, has been read and studied not only in China but also in other East Asian countries, notably in Japan. Its authors, the two Western Han historians Sima Tan (?–110 BCE) and his son Sima Qian (c. 145–c. 86 BCE), proudly gave it the title *Taishigong shu*, the *Documents of the Grand Historian* (or *the Grand Scribe* or *the Grand Astronomer*, depending upon how one decides to translate the office that both historians were entrusted with by Emperor Wu of the Han). Having access to books and writings that must have been available in an archive or a library within the palaces in Chang'an and relying on many other sources, both Sima Tan and Sima Qian wrote down their view of the history of the world known to them down to their own times. Although their book was called a “true record” by early readers in the Han, it was also accused of being a slanderous work that criticized the Han dynasty. Maybe this is one of the reasons that, starting in the second century CE, the *Taishigong shu* was called *Shiji*, meaning “Records of the Scribes”, or perhaps “Historical Records”, a much more modest description of the contents of the book that might suggest it contains mere records and not the personal opinions of their authors. The tension that exists between the two ideas of a “true record” and of a historian’s more personal view of things has influenced the reading of many Chinese authors writing on the *Shiji* during the last two thousand years.

At least since Édouard Chavannes introduced the book to a European readership more than one hundred years ago in his masterful translation of and his copious notes to the first fifty chapters, the *Shiji* has become an essential element in Western scholarship on China and studying it has become an indispensable part of any respectable education in Chinese studies. Despite the hundreds of traditional Chinese, Japanese, and Korean commentaries that piled up over the centuries as well as the thousands of research articles and monographs that have been produced during the last hundred years by modern scholars, in both the East and the West, the book continues to puzzle scholars and will certainly continue to do so for many centuries to come.

Given the huge amount of scholarship on the *Shiji* in the East Asian tradition, the articles collected in this volume cannot achieve much more than offering some new insights from scholars who, with one exception, are working in a Western environment. Raising both old and new questions and trying to give answers that at least in Western scholarship on China have not yet been given, this collection also provides an overview of some of the latest discussions in the ongoing debate on the *Shiji* and its authors. At the same time, the authors endeavor to offer new perspectives and present discoveries and innovative interpretations of certain aspects of the *Shiji* that in our opinion, despite the existence of rich scholarship, have not been fully explored so far.

The authors originally gathered at a conference entitled “*Shiji* and Beyond”, organized by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation International Sinological Center in Prague in December 2011. This was the third conference on the *Shiji* in a series started in 2008 by Professor Lee Chi-hsiang at Fo Guang University in Taiwan. Its organizers have tried to bring together scholars who have been actively promoting *Shiji* studies in Taiwan, the US, Canada, and several European countries.

The papers presented at the Prague workshop, a majority of which are collected here, have been newly arranged for this volume. They are now divided into two sections, entitled “Views from Within” and “Views from Beyond”. Such an arrangement seems plausible to the editors because almost all of the papers either have their main focus on a reading of the text itself or look at its later reception. Unfortunately, two of the presented papers could not be included in this volume. Nevertheless, since we think that their contents constituted an important contribution to the conference, we have decided to give an overview of them for the readers in this introduction. Here, we describe these papers where we feel they thematically fit.

“Views from Within” begins with Bernhard Führer’s paper (“Sima Qian as a Reader of the Master’s Utterances”), which is concerned with the question of what the source or sources may have looked like that Sima Qian used to write about Confucius’ utterances, primarily in chapters 47 and 65 of the *Shiji*, and also how and to which end he used these sources. While he is reluctant to identify the source of the transmitted text of the *Lunyu*, Führer concludes that the *Shiji* constitutes the earliest extant text material that provides interpretation, contextualization, and application of a significant portion of the utterances attributed to Master Kong.

Yuri Kroll (“Toward a Study of the Concept of Linear Time in the *Shiji*”) challenges the old but still widespread theory that Sima Qian’s historical thinking was wholly cyclical. Basing his approach on the fact that devotion to the long-term and even transdynastic developments of clans is an important objective of the historiography of the *Shiji*, including the historian’s attempt at tracing the descendants even of mythical emperors over a long period of time, Kroll adduces convincing evidence for the idea that the contents of the *Shiji* are certainly not merely the result of conceiving time cyclically but rather the result of a framework in which the historiographer simultaneously incorporates both linear and cyclical concepts of time.

Lee Chi-hsiang, in his paper “Sima Qian’s View of Zhou History in the *Shiji*”, approaches the periodization of the Zhou dynasty from an exegetical point of view. Whereas later interpretations take King Ping’s (770–720 BCE) move to the east and the relocation of the capital as the point of transition from the Western to the Eastern Zhou, Lee finds that in the historian’s reading, King Li’s reign (877–841 BCE) is taken as the crucial turning point in the fate of the Zhou dynasty. By doing so, Lee argues, Sima Qian adopts the idea of a historical transformation during which the former power of the Zhou continuously declined and was claimed by rulers of the former periphery, an idea which is interpreted in early *Chunqiu* exegesis as basically the reading of Confucius himself

when he worked on the Annals of Lu. The way the Zhou periodization is treated in the *Shiji* is thus a highly interesting example of an approach that is remarkably different from the reading that became common at the time of Ban Gu and Zheng Xuan, was explicitly formulated and exegetically justified by Du Yu, and gained wide currency under the Tang.

Hans van Ess (“The Friends of Sima Tan and Sima Qian”) tests the hypothesis that Sima Tan and Sima Qian are two people with possibly different ideological stands that might be distinguishable. Van Ess bases his approach on several sections of the *Shiji* in which acquaintances or even friends of the historiographer—be it Sima Tan or Sima Qian—are mentioned. These were people he visited personally, wrote letters to, or talked to directly. After closer examination of the relationship between the historian and these people, van Ess comes to the conclusion that in some cases it is highly probable that either Sima Tan or Sima Qian was the friend or acquaintance of these people. This is an important hint that supports the idea that the *taishigong* was an identity shared by both men writing in succession rather than simultaneously. On the other hand, van Ess concludes that the “informants” of both men had at least good reason to dislike the imperial family. Thus, van Ess argues, one cannot distinguish the two Simas in terms of their ideological inclination from this perspective.

Li Wai-yee’s paper (“Historical Understanding in ‘The Account of the Xiongnu’ in the *Shiji*”) is based on chapter 110 of the *Shiji* on the Xiongnu and examines the role of “China’s northern neighbors or enemies” in the overall conception of this first universal history. By claiming that the Xiongnu rulers descended from the mythical King Jie, the very last (and bad) ruler of the Xia, Sima Qian strived, according to Li, to assign to these “barbarians” a place of their own within the realm of the *oikumene*. In addition, she argues that Sima Qian expresses subtle criticism of the wars that Han Emperor Wu waged against the Xiongnu, and what is more, in her reading of Sima Qian’s account of the Xiongnu, he seems to question arguments dehumanizing the Xiongnu or glorifying imperial expansion.

Giulia Baccini (“The *Shiji* Chapter ‘Guji Liezhuan’ (Biographies of Witty Remonstrants)”) searches the eight narratives centered on three protagonists contained in chapter 126 of the *Shiji*, the “Biographies of Witty Remonstrants”, for rhetorical structures that justify their classification alongside tales about remonstrance recorded in (late) Warring States texts such as the *Hanfeizi*, *Guanzi*, *Zuo zhuan*, and *Zhanguo ce*. Primarily following Schaberg’s analysis of narrative strategies and structures of remonstrance tales in the *Zuozhuan*, Baccini applies these patterns to the anecdotes of the witty remonstrants recorded in the *Shiji*. She finds that each of the *Shiji* narratives has an underlying structure very similar to earlier anecdotes aimed at indirectly admonishing a ruler in a way that conveyed to him a hidden message which he, given that he was sensitive enough, could decode and accordingly correct his wrong behavior.

Michael Nylan (“Assets Accumulating: Sima Qian’s Perspective on Moneymaking, Virtue, and History”) reads the message conveyed in *Shiji* chapter 129 as another exam-

ple of the eminently moral vision that the historiographer displays in this *opus magnum*. After highlighting some major features discussed in the chapter itself, she points out that this chapter, which is the last chapter of the “biographies” (*liezhuan*), should be read in tandem with chapter 61, the first chapter of this last part of the *Shiji*. In the end, Nylan presents Sima Qian’s views of fame, wealth, and moneymaking in the context of his moral vision.

The second part of this conference volume, “Views from Beyond”, aptly commences with Béatrice l’Haridon’s paper (“The Merchants in the *Shiji*: An Interpretation in the Light of Later Debates”) in which she, like Michael Nylan, analyzes chapter 129. However, l’Haridon primarily addresses the later reception of this chapter. The harsh criticism that was at first expressed by Yang Xiong in his *Fayan* and later by Ban Gu in his *Hanshu* is directed, as she argues, primarily against the nearly liberal attitude that the historiographer displays towards what he calls the “desire for profit”. Whereas the historiographer regards profit-seeking as a central driving force behind social change, Yang Xiong and Ban Gu see it a main cause of decadence in society.

Esther Klein, in her paper on “Truth and Contradiction in the *Shiji*”, which unfortunately was not at our disposal for publication here, examines the history of *Shiji* scholarship and reception and traces the development of divergent ways in which the *Shiji* was perceived as a “true” record. Because the *Shiji* was such a foundational and influential text, Klein argues, the implications of these readings go beyond the field of *Shiji* interpretation, playing a formative role in the Chinese historical tradition as a whole.

Dorothee Schaab-Hanke (“Inheritor of a Subversive Mind? Approaching Yang Yun from his Letter to Sun Huizong”) argues how biographical matters and personal biases must have been an important issue at the last stage of writing and distributing the *Shiji*. Taking into account the importance of the role of Sima Qian’s grandson, Yang Yun, Schaab-Hanke examines Yang Yun’s letter to Sun Huizong and compares it with Sima Qian’s letter to Ren An. These two documents were included by Ban Gu in his *Hanshu*, and this paper, apart from disclosing similar features of the personalities of Yang Yun and Sima Qian and their personal values, also demonstrates how Ban Gu may have manipulated the transmitted material in order to create a negative picture of Sima Qian and his grandson as “possessors of a subversive mind”.

Stephen Durrant (“Ban Biao, Ban Gu and Their Five *Shiji* Sources”) discusses the five major sources that Ban Biao and his son, Gu, claim Sima Qian used to write the part of his history related to the Han. Durrant points out the slightly amusing fact that Liu Zhiji, in his later reception, criticized Sima Qian for not having relied enough upon one of these sources, namely the *Chu Han chunqiu* (*Seasons of Chu and Han*) attributed to Lu Jia. Searching the text of the *Shiji* for parallels between the 50 or so extant fragments of the *Chu Han chunqiu*, a text that probably disappeared soon after the compilation of the *Hanshu*, Durrant comes to the conclusion that the *Shiji* version of some of the comparable passages is longer, whereas in other cases it is shorter. Durrant argues, however,

that the historiographer must have had at his disposal many more sources from which he could choose and that he may also have reworked the accounts to meet his own ideas. Thus, Durrant concludes that Liu Zhiji's criticism that Sima Qian should have relied more on the *Chu Han chunqiu* could also be read as a hidden criticism of Sima Qian's tendency towards some "literary polish" of his own.

William Nienhauser ("The Role of Takigawa Kametarō's Study of the *Shiji* in Modern Scholarship") reconsiders the life and merits of the Japanese *Shiji* scholar Takigawa Kametarō (1865–1946) with a special focus on the later reception of his critical edition of the *Shiji*, the *Shiki kaichū kōshō*, in China, Japan, and the West. Starting out with his own rather critical personal judgement on the academic worth of this now widely used edition of the *Shiji* in both the East and in the West, Nienhauser proceeds to give a biographical sketch of Takigawa and finally summarizes the controversial discussion of his merits in the Chinese reception. While admitting that the sharp criticism that Takigawa received by Chinese scholars, such as Lu Shixian (1930–1977), may have been at least partly due to the political tensions between China and Japan at the time, Nienhauser confirms that Takigawa was greatly influenced by the theories of Liang Yusheng (1745–1819), who questioned the authenticity of several chapters in the received edition of the *Shiji*. In the modern Chinese reception of Takigawa's work, Nienhauser writes, a majority of scholars, including Zhang Yanqian, give a more balanced judgment. As for Takigawa's reception by Western scholars, Nienhauser mainly focuses on the influence that the *Shiki kaichū kōshō* had on Burton Watson's translation of the *Shiji*.

Lü Shih-hao, in a bold and meticulous study that will be published elsewhere, takes a fresh look at the transmission of the *Shiji* during the Han and Jin periods, basing his analysis on the comments by Zhang Yan (3rd cent. CE) and Xu Guang (352–425 CE).¹ Lü comes to the following conclusions: (1) A close comparison of Zhang Yan's comments contained in the received edition of the *Shiji* with Zhang Yan's comments added to the *Hanshu* suggests that the comments added to the *Shiji* were taken by Pei Yin (living around 438 CE) from the annotated *Hanshu* and enclosed in his own *Shiji* commentary; (2) During the Han and Jin periods comments on the *Shiji* were rare while comments on the *Hanshu* abounded. The political inclinations of the Han and Jin courts during this time account for this discrepancy; (3) The current, complete 130-chapter volume of the *Shiji*, Lü argues, is nothing but the result of Xu Guang's (352–425 CE) painstaking comparative efforts, and the fact that the *Shiji* in its later reception could come to such full fruition is ultimately to Xu Guang's credit.

The volume closes with Christoph Harbsmeier's comparative study "Living up to Contrasting Portraiture: Plutarch on Alexander the Great and Sima Qian on the First Qin

¹ The Chinese title of Lü Shih-hao's 呂世浩 paper is "Cong Zhang Yan, Xu Guang zhu lun Han Jin jian *Shiji* de liuzhuan" 從張晏、徐廣注論漢晉間《史記》的流傳 (Discussing the transmission of the *Shiji* between the Han and Jin periods based on an analysis of the comments by Zhang Yan and Xu Guang).

Emperor”. Apart from referring to the *Shiji* and Western historical sources, Harbsmeier also makes ample use of visual material from both ancient worlds, eventually arriving at general observations about “basic cultural patterns of self-fabrication in different cultures”.

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Hans van Ess, Olga Lomová, and Dorothee Schaab-Hanke