

# *On the Differential Presentation Features of Narrative Time in Chinese Historiographical Literature*

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**Abstract.** This paper analyzes the differentiated narrative time mechanisms embedded in classical Chinese historiographical (or *zhuàn*, biographical historical) literary texts, taking two representative canonical masterpieces of Chinese classical historiographical literature, *Records of the Grand Historian* (the first biographical general history in Chinese history) and *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* (one of the most influential annalistic general histories compiled in the Northern Song dynasty), as comparative research samples. Through systematic comparative analysis from two core dimensions of long-established editorial conventions and underlying authorial creative motivations, this study reveals that the divergence of their narrative time systems is jointly driven by the inherent structural differences between biographical and annalistic historiographical traditions, as well as the essential distinction between private scholarly ambition for independent thought construction and the official mandate of providing practical governance reference for imperial rulers. This study provides global cross-cultural audiences without specialized sinology background with a concise, easy-to-apply analytical framework to understand the distinctive expressive conventions of Chinese classical narratives, and fills relevant longstanding cognitive gaps in cross-cultural communication and comparative literature research scenarios.

**Keywords:** Chinese historiographical literary texts, narrative time, cross-cultural communication, *Records of the Grand Historian*, *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*

## 1. Introduction

Literary texts constitute the core carrier for global audiences to apprehend the intrinsic spirit of Chinese culture in cross-cultural communication practices, and their strategic value in China's national cultural narrative system has been increasingly recognized in recent academic discourses. As a repository of unique patterns of thought, aesthetic preferences and value orientations shared across generations of the Chinese nation, classical Chinese historiographical literature works stand as the foundational origin of all subsequent Chinese narrative literature, and cannot be bypassed in any rigorous research (widely regarded as a core reference for research on Chinese literary traditions) on early modern Chinese literary traditions. Among all core dimensions of textual analysis, narrative time, which directly defines the depth of thematic expression, recognizability of

stylistic construction and efficiency of emotional transmission in a given text, represents the critical entry point to decode the underlying logic of classical Chinese narratives [1]. Before proceeding to the core analysis, it is necessary to clarify the disciplinary positioning of the two selected research texts: both *Records of the Grand Historian* and *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* fall into the category of Chinese traditional historiographical literature, a special sub-category within the broader system of classical Chinese historiography that stands out explicitly for its distinct literary aesthetic value beyond basic documentary historical recording. This sub-category refers specifically to formally compiled classical historical works that prioritize factual historical documentation while simultaneously carrying significant intentional artistic design, careful narrative crafting, and distinct literary expressive traits, and has long been recognized as a core constitutive part of the classical Chinese narrative literature system in existing literary studies.

Studies of narrative time in international narratology mostly draw on the core analytical framework developed by French scholar Gérard Genette [2], while two areas remain underexplored in current research. First, systematic comparisons of how narrative time conventions differ across different texts within the long-established tradition of Chinese classical historiographical literature have not been widely conducted, which creates clear barriers for readers training in without professional traditional Chinese culture and history to grasp the full contextual background. Second, a large portion of existing scholarship focuses on close reading of individual standalone texts, with relatively limited targeted cross-text comparison across different genre categories within the same historiographical lineage, and generalized summaries of consistent internal patterns and distinct operating mechanisms across the full text corpus are not yet widely seen.

Following this line of inquiry, this paper adopts the narrative time theory put forward in Genette's *Narrative Discourse* as its core analytical foundation. This framework has already been adjusted and verified in recent cross-cultural narratology work to support more flexible analysis for non-Western local historical materials. Published work on contemporary Persian fiction has confirmed its applicability across non-European literary contexts, showing that the framework maintains full analytical utility outside its original French narratological setting [3]. This study applies the theory specifically to examine the distinct narrative time arrangements embedded in widely studied Chinese historical texts. The goal of this work is to clarify the concrete humanistic logic and literary values behind these longstanding narrative conventions, and provide a practical analytical reference for global researchers to interpret traditional Chinese narrative practices more accurately.

## 2. Core definitions of narrative time concepts

Standard narratology widely distinguishes two interrelated layers of narrative time: story time and text narrative time.

Story time is the actual chronological sequence and duration of events that occur in the real world. For example, the complete life of a historical figure, or the full timeline of a major historical event from its early planning to final outcome, cannot be changed arbitrarily by the narrator. By contrast, narrative time means the author's subjective reordered presentation of these objective events, where the writer adjusts the chronological sequence, description length, and occurrence frequency of original events within the limited space of the text.

Following Genette's classic original framework, this textual level of narrative time is generally analyzed across three separate measurable dimensions: order, duration, and frequency. Order describes the difference between the real chronological sequence of events in the story, and the reordered sequence readers see in the published text, including common techniques such as flashback, foreshadowing, and narrative intercutting. Duration measures the proportional relation

between the real-world duration of an event, and the length of text the author devotes to describing it. This dimension sets the overall narrative rhythm of the full text, and has four common forms: summary, pause, scene presentation, and ellipsis. Frequency compares how many times a specific event actually happens in the real story world, against how many times the author explicitly describes it in the text. It generally has three classifications: singular narrative, where an event happens once and is narrated once; repetitive narrative, where the same event is described multiple times from different observational perspectives; and iterative narrative, where a large number of similar repeated events are condensed into one representative description.

### 3. Comparative analysis of narrative time features in canonical historical texts

As the fountainhead of Chinese narrative literature, traditional Chinese historiography, with its diverse editorial conventions and mature narrative techniques, has exerted a far-reaching influence on the creation of subsequent literary genres ranging from fiction to prose. The character-centric narrative structure demonstrated in classic fictions such as *Water Margin* and *The True Story of Ah Q* is directly inherited from the biographical paradigm pioneered by *Records of the Grand Historian*, and the "The Historian's Remarks" commentary convention at the end of each story in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* constitutes solid evidence that early modern Chinese novelists deliberately drew on the narrative perspective of official historiographers. These observations confirm that traditional Chinese historiographical literature (classical Chinese prose narratives rooted in historical records) functioned as the core foundational narrative template for the vast majority of subsequent classical Chinese narrative works [4].

Traditional Chinese historiography developed six major formal compilation conventions throughout its long evolutionary history: annalistic, biographical, event-centric, institutional categorization, outline-substance, and academic school historiography. Among these distinct traditions, only the biographical and annalistic lineages qualify as core representatives of classical Chinese historiographical literature. These two bodies of work stand out as particularly foundational in terms of their literary and artistic value, cross-generational cultural influence, and disciplinary significance for the development of subsequent Chinese narrative writing. Against this background, this study selects two of the most influential peak works from these two respective traditions as its research samples to compare the distinct characteristics of their narrative time systems and the underlying formation mechanisms.

This sample selection is further justified by two key considerations from existing scholarship. First, the *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* is the most widely recognized pre-modern Chinese general history in international sinology, with a complete authoritative English translation and standardized critical editions available, unlike many dynastic histories with incomplete translations or significant textual variants. Second, as established in relevant studies, *Records of the Grand Historian* and *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* form an identifiable representative intertextual narrative lineage covering most core historical periods of pre-imperial to late medieval China, far more representative than other partial historical records or unofficial texts, and its rationality as a comparative research sample has received effective empirical support in recent cutting-edge Sinological studies on Song-Yuan historiography [5-7].

Sima Qian spent more than ten years drafting *Records of the Grand Historian*, adhering to the core scholarly mission of "investigating the boundaries between heaven and humanity, and understanding the historical evolution from a comprehensive perspective", and eventually completed the first biographical general history in Chinese history. Out of traditional respect for the author's scholarly legacy, this paper uses the historical honorific "Grand Historian" when referring

to Sima Qian in the subsequent discussion. The text is structured around five core components: basic annals, chronological tables, treatises, hereditary houses, and biographies of notable figures, which successfully encapsulate thousands of years of long-term historical development and cross-regional civilizational interactions within a unified narrative framework. The work also explicitly establishes its unique material selection principle as documented in "The Biographies of Boyi" and "The Biographies of Shuqi" [8], requiring all historical accounts to be validated against the Six Classics of Confucianism.

*Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*, compiled under the lead of Sima Guang during the Northern Song dynasty, centers on the core principle of "drawing reference from past events to inform contemporary governance", covering 16 consecutive dynasties from the pre-Qin period to the end of the Five Dynasties era, and elevates the annalistic historiographical tradition to an unprecedented new height in Chinese history.

### 3.1. Distinctions at narrative order level

From the underlying logic of narrative order, the core objective of biographical narratives is to construct three-dimensional portraits of historical figures through the proper arrangement of historical events. At the macrostructural level, *Records of the Grand Historian* constructs a clear and straightforward chronological narrative framework through its five-part structure comprising basic annals, chronological tables, treatises, hereditary houses, and individual biographies, laying down the foundational narrative convention followed by the vast majority of subsequent official Chinese dynastic historiographical works that take chronological order as their primary organizing thread.

At the macrostructural level, *Records of the Grand Historian* uses five clearly divided sections, basic annals, chronological tables, treatises, hereditary family records, and individual biographies, to build a clear chronological narrative backbone. This structure established the core convention followed by most subsequent Chinese official dynastic histories, which arrange their overall content with chronological order as the primary organizing thread [9].

At the individual text level, however, Sima Qian never sticks to a strict linear chronological timeline. He makes deliberate and flexible use of narrative tools, including flashbacks and supplementary background accounts, to build far more layered character portraits than pure chronology would allow. A typical case appears in "The Basic Annals of Xiang Yu" [8]. The chapter first records that Xiang Yu was 24 when he raised his first army to rebel against the Qin dynasty, then goes back to recount his teenage years: he quit practicing both literary writing and swordsmanship, stating he only wanted to learn the skill to command thousands of troops. This narrative design does not treat the rebellion as an abrupt, disconnected event, but uses Xiang Yu's early life choices to illustrate the inherent personality traits that directly supported his later military command decisions.

Another representative arrangement appears in "The Biographies of Li Si" [8]. The chapter opens with a well-known anecdote from when Li Si was still a minor county clerk: he saw rats living in public latrines eat dirty scraps and panic every time someone came near, while rats living in local granaries ate full piles of grain and never got disturbed by humans. This observation directly shaped his core belief that individual success depends far more on the context they are in than personal effort, a value that clearly foreshadows his lifelong pursuit of political power and his final, tragic death. The text places this small formative anecdote at the very start of his biography, to create an explicit narrative echo between his early worldview and all his later life choices.

In comparison, the core organizing logic of annalistic historiographical literature is to weave together the scattered activities of different historical figures across separate chronological

timelines, to reconstruct a complete, uninterrupted narrative of historical facts. *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* also uses chronological narration as its main form, but the entire text is strictly structured around year-month-day timestamps, with its coverage spanning from the 23rd year of King Weilie of Zhou to the 6th year of Emperor Xiande of the Later Zhou dynasty. Its chronological recording has no intentional gaps, so readers can clearly track the continuous evolutionary path of historical development over more than 1300 years.

Of course, the pure annalistic format has inherent structural drawbacks. A complete multi-year historical event is often artificially split into separate entries distributed across different months and years, which breaks the narrative coherence of the entire event. To make up for this flaw, Sima Guang's compilation team regularly adjusts narrative order appropriately to restore the full context of key events. Especially when a major historical event cannot be fully explained within the scope of a single chronological entry, they naturally use transition phrases like "at that time" or "in the early stage of this event" to break the rigid constraint of strict year-month-day ordering, and narrate the full process of the event as a coherent whole [10].

### 3.2. Distinctions at narrative duration level

At the macro level, a widely observed shared feature of historical writing across Chinese historiographical and historiographical literature traditions is that the narrative progression speed in the text is significantly faster than the actual occurrence speed of historical events in reality, and the duration of real events often differs from the corresponding amount of descriptive text by multiple orders of magnitude.

*Records of the Grand Historian* fit this established pattern without exception. As recorded in "The Basic Annals of Xiang Yu" [8], Sima Qian wraps up more than ten years of Xiang Yu's adolescent life before the rebellion in fewer than 100 words, only noting that the young warlord gave up both literary training and sword practice, stating plainly that he would rather master military strategy to command tens of thousands of troops. This compact passage takes up negligible space across the full text and clearly embodies the highly efficient narrative compression feature that defines biographical historiographical literature.

When people zoom into finer textual details, however, the biographical narrative format carries a distinct, original feature that sets it sharply apart from annalistic historical works. Most annalistic history books from ancient China were boxed in by the strict chronological structure of imperial annals, and naturally defaulted to a standard rule: narrative space is spread evenly across chronological units of the same length. *Records of the Grand Historian* breaks this long-accepted convention to a large extent. Its biographical system assigns text volume dynamically based on the actual historical weight of each figure's recorded deeds, rather than tying description length rigidly to the absolute year-month-day timeline. For stretches of time where no landmark events took place, Sima Qian freely combines all four standard duration processing techniques, ellipsis, summary, scene, and pause, to avoid wasting space on trivial details.

A concrete example appears in "The Basic Annals of Qin" [8]. The narrative uses deliberate ellipsis to skip over uneventful years, jumping directly from the state of Jin launching a surprise raid on Qin during a widespread famine in the 15th year of the reign, to the death of Duke Huan of Qi in the 18th year, and finally to Qin's annexation of the Liang and Rui states in the 20th year. This editing choice filters out all non-critical plotlines and reallocates the limited text space to highlight core historical events and critical turning points. Another representative case comes from "The Biographies of General Li" [8]. While Li Guang was posted as garrison commander in Youbeiping, the Xiongnu forces held such high respect for his military track record that they nicknamed him the

"Flying General of Han", and avoided invading the entire border region for years afterward. This tightly condensed summary covers dozens of scattered minor border skirmishes that unfolded over his multi-year tenure, reinforcing the legendary edge of his military reputation without cluttering the text with unnecessary descriptive flourishes.

### 3.3. Distinctions at the narrative frequency level

From the perspective of narrative frequency, the characterization practice in *Records of the Grand Historian* presents a distinct high-frequency intertextuality feature: Sima Qian excels at shaping three-dimensional portraits of the same core historical figure through multiple narrative units, each from a distinct complementary perspective. Figures such as Liu Bang, Xiang Yu, Qin Shi Huang, Wu Zixu and Confucius are all represented through this multi-pronged representation approach, with Liu Bang as the core historical actor whose life trajectory spans both the Qin collapse and Han founding period, offering the most representative case of intertextual representation.

The historical records of Liu Bang, founder of the Han dynasty, are distributed across multiple chapters, including "The Basic Annals of Emperor Gao", "The Basic Annals of Xiang Yu", "The Hereditary House of Marquis of Liu (Zhang Liang's biography)", and "The Hereditary House of Chen Ping" [8]. While these accounts reference overlapping events, each chapter emphasizes distinct aspects of Liu Bang's character: the imperial annals frame him as a legitimate dynastic founder, while the Xiang Yu chapter highlights his more human, flawed traits during the Chu-Han Contention. This cross-chapter intertextual narration creates a far more nuanced, multi-dimensional portrait than a single linear account could achieve.

By comparison, the narrative frequency structure of *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* is far more concise and unified. Adhering to the principle of singular narrative throughout the whole text, the work typically recounts each historical event only once. Taking the Battle of Red Cliffs as a representative example, the narrative does not adopt a one-sided perspective from any of the three warring parties. Instead, it integrates all relevant historical accounts from the perspectives of Wei, Shu and Wu, and integrates all these disparate sources into the unified chronological entry corresponding to the exact time of the event.

Through the comparative analysis of these two representative samples from different historiographical conventions, this study can identify a fundamental shared trait: both the biographical tradition represented by *Records of the Grand Historian* and the annalistic tradition represented by *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* adopt continuous chronological sequential narration as their core narrative backbone. Their significant divergences at the micro level of narrative techniques precisely constitute the core literary attribute that distinguishes creative historical writing from dry, purely official archival records. The biographical convention focuses on interconnecting full historical trajectories through the life stories of individual characters, while the annalistic convention prioritizes presenting the complete evolutionary logic of history through an absolute chronological organizing thread.

## 4. Subjective creative motivation as a shaping factor of narrative time

Apart from the rigid structural constraints imposed by objective editorial conventions, the author's subjective creative goals and the specific life context in which the work is composed constitute another core set of factors that shape the narrative time characteristics of the final text. Based on the well-documented distinct creative contexts of *Records of the Grand Historian* and *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*, the two contrasting sets of creative motivations can be clearly

categorized into two broad types: works written to satisfy the private scholarly aspirations of individual creators, and works written to fulfill the governance demands of imperial rulers. These two categories can be further contextualized against the creator's own life status at the time of composition: works written in a state of personal career frustration, and works written when the author enjoys full official recognition and institutional support.

Ever since the Qin dynasty enacted the legal statute that no one outside the official historiographer family shall be allowed to receive historiographical training in official schools, the knowledge transmission of historical writing became a highly exclusive profession with very restricted access [11]. This institutional background dictates that Sima Qian's original motivation for composing *Records of the Grand Historian* came first and foremost from the family bequest entrusted to him by his father Sima Tan, who held his hand and wept before his death, urging him to carry on the multi-generational historiographical legacy of their clan, whose ancestors had served as official historiographers as far back as the Yu and Xia dynasties. His overarching ambition was to "establish a distinctive school of thought" in his own right.

This official framing shifts dramatically when considering Sima Qian's personal context, as documented in his famous "Letter to Ren An". Written after he was sentenced to castration for defending the disgraced general Li Ling, the letter reveals he saw his potential death at the time as meaningless, "no more significant than a single hair plucked from an ox, or an ant crushed underfoot". This experience of profound humiliation and personal injustice deeply shaped his writing: while he strictly adhered to historical facts, he wove subtle personal judgments and emotional resonance into his narrative choices, making *Records of the Grand Historian* far more than an official archival record. It remained, at its core, a work of independent scholarship driven by his ambition to "establish a distinct school of thought".

The creative context of Sima Guang leading the compilation of the *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* stands in sharp contrast to that of Sima Qian: Emperor Yingzong of Song personally appointed him to a dedicated, government-funded compilation team, and Emperor Shenzong of Song personally wrote a preface for the finished work. From its very inception, the project enjoyed extremely high official honor and priority access to imperial resources. Although Sima Guang had temporarily left the central court due to factional conflicts between the reformists and conservatives and lived in retreat in Luoyang, his scholarly reputation and the explicit support from previous generations of emperors kept his prestige among the entire literati community unshaken.

The overarching creative objective of the whole work was explicitly defined as serving the highest ruler of the empire from the very beginning: Sima Guang had no need whatsoever to show off his personal literary talent through the text, and only needed to record the historical evolutionary trajectory faithfully. As a result, the entire writing style fully serves its core objective of "imperial moral education": it rejects the emotionally charged, legend-emphasizing literary techniques widely adopted in *Records of the Grand Historian*, and reconstructs historical narratives with an extremely restrained, concise and plain prose style. Every rhetorical device used in the text strictly serves the purpose of rational political ethics didacticism. Under the strict annalistic framing, the occasional use of flexible narrative techniques such as prolepsis, flashback and supplementary recall is exclusively designed to present historical facts more clearly, not to convey any personal emotions from the author.

The comparison between these two cases reveals a clear generalized pattern: historical works completed to fulfill imperial governance demands when the creators enjoy full official recognition and stable professional status mostly adopt straightforward sequential narration as the absolute dominant form, with very restrained use of artistic narrative techniques, prioritizing the fulfillment

of the official historiographical mandate as the core objective. For works completed to pursue individual scholarly ambitions when the creator is in a state of severe personal setback and frustration, the creators are far more likely to flexibly deploy artistic narrative techniques, including prolepsis, flashback and retrospective narration, to channel personal emotions and demonstrate their exceptional scholarly capabilities as their primary objective. Therefore, before reading any literary work produced in a specific historical period, a preliminary review of the author's life experience and creative context will help readers far more accurately grasp the deeper implications behind the unique arrangement of narrative time choices in the text.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, through the systematic comparative study of these two canonical peak texts of traditional Chinese historiographical literature, this research confirms that the prominent divergences between their narrative time systems are jointly driven by two sets of interrelated factors: the inherent attributes of their respective editorial conventions and the distinct constraints imposed by their respective subjective creative objectives. This research selects the core representative passages from two historiographical literature masterpieces of completely different genres and sharply differing authorial contexts to carry out the empirical analysis. Biographical historiographical literature texts take individual historical figures as their core narrative unit, and the allocation of narrative duration across different figures and events is highly non-uniform.

For the most critical events in a core figure's life, the narrative will allocate far more text to lay out more nuanced, multi-dimensional portraits that avoid oversimplifying complex historical figures.

These texts also show distinct high-frequency intertextuality in how they handle narrative frequency: the same shared historical event will be recounted again in separate biographical chapters, each from a different complementary perspective, to gradually add new layers of nuance to how that event is presented to readers.

For annalistic historiographical literature, the absolute chronological timeline acts as its core organizing logic by default, pulling scattered historical facts distributed across disconnected individual time points into a single, fully coherent narrative line. Their narrative sequence strictly adheres to the objective evolutionary timeline of history, with an extremely fine-grained temporal resolution, and highlights the causal links behind historical development through a high density of interconnected event records.

In terms of the preference for deploying flexible narrative order techniques, even though both traditions are anchored in sequential chronological narration, biographical texts and creators who composed their works in a state of personal frustration demonstrate a higher tendency to deploy innovative narrative techniques including flashback and prolepsis.

To highlight a critical turning point in a figure's life trajectory, biographical works will regularly break the standard linear chronological convention, stating the final outcome of the event first before tracing back step by step to lay out its full causal path.

Authors in a state of life frustration often use proleptic narrative techniques to encode implicit normative judgments about historical events or project their own personal life sentiments into their flashback narratives, eventually elevating narrative time itself into an essential carrier for emotional expression. By contrast, historiographers with stable institutional support and widespread official recognition tend to follow the standardized chronological conventions inherited from longstanding historiographical traditions. They very rarely depart from the strict year-month-day sequence

without clear textual justification, and even faint traces of personal sentiment that appear between the lines almost never serve as the core organizing thread of the full narrative.

To sum up, the distinctive differentiated characteristics of narrative time in traditional Chinese historical texts are not merely the objective manifestation of historiographical editorial conventions, but also deeply reflect the complex interaction between the subjective consciousness of individual historiographers and the political and cultural context of the specific historical era they lived in. Follow-up research can bring in more dimensions, including the detailed life trajectories of different historians, the concrete political environment they worked in, and their individual positions on historiographical methodology, to further clarify the concrete causal mechanisms that shape how different authors' attributes produce distinct narrative time patterns.

Future studies can also extend this analytical framework to other important corpora of traditional Chinese writing, including the diverse intellectual traditions represented in the pre-Qin Masters of the Philosophers texts, to further deepen the systematic understanding of the underlying cultural logic embedded in the narrative time conventions of classical Chinese literature.

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