

A Study on Sima Qian's View of Life and Death and the Principle and Influence of His Writing

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Abstract: As one of the most significant historians in Chinese history, Sima Qian is well known for his great work *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*). His personal life, however, was full of difficulties and hardships. Because of the disagreement and conflict with Emperor Wu of Han, Sima Qian was punished by being castrated, which made him suffer a deep sense of shame. However, in his letter to Ren An, a friend and colleague of him, Sima Qian still expressed that he had no regret being a historian and that he had made up his mind to preserve the Confucian ideals of devotion and integrity. This paper tries to examine the legacy of this unique individual in Chinese history by analyzing Sima Qian's view of life and death based on his letter to Ren An, as well as his writing principles and influences. Conclusions can be drawn that Sima Qian chose to live in shame for the reason that he intended to fulfill his duty as a son and a historian. He committed to Confucian principles when writing, and his works have had a great impact on Chinese history, literature, and cultural memory.

Keywords: East Asian study, *Shiji*, *Records of the Grand Historian*, Sima Qian

1. Introduction

Sima Qian is well-known for his identity as the first great Chinese historian in history as well as his masterpiece *Records of the Grand Historian*, which leaves great literary wealth for future generations. However, before he could finish his masterpiece, Sima Qian deeply offended the emperor by coming to the defense of a disgraced general [1]. As a result, he got castrated, which is one of the most humiliating punishments in ancient China. Later, he struggled with a deep sense of humiliation and was forced to let go of his role as a court historian. However, he could have more time to do his own writing stuff with more freedom of recording the truth while escaping from the control of Emperor Wu. He understood that his career of writing *Records of the Grand Historian* for later generations was more important than his personal status or reputation. In his letter to Ren An, Sima Qian showed his attitude as a historian and explained his choice of writing *Records of the Grand Historian*. In this paper, the author first analyzes Sima Qian's view of life and death, so as to summarize the reasons for his determination to finish the writing of *Records of the Grand Historian*. Then, the author explores Sima Qian's writing principles and philosophy. Finally, the influences of *Records of the Grand Historian* on the later generations are summarized. The paper can help readers have a more clear and complete understanding of Sima Qian as well as the creation process of *Records of the Grand Historian*.

2. Sima Qian's View of Life and Death

Sima Qian was committed to preserving the historical record and providing a true and objective account of the past. These beliefs, however, put him at odds with Emperor Wu, who preferred a more laudatory official history that highlighted his dynasty's accomplishments to leave future people with an impression of a talented emperor. As a result, Emperor Wu decided to punish him with castration. At that time, there were two possible choices for Sima Qian. One was to accept the castration and live in humiliation and loss of dignity for the rest of his life. The other option was to commit suicide, just as Qu Yuan did, as Sima Qian wrote in his letter to Ren An that "Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather [2]". In Sima Qian's view, this kind of death could retain his dignity, and even left him a decisive heroic image in history. However, after thinking for a period of time, he decided to accept castration because he believed that he had a more important thing to do which was to complete *Records of the Grand Historian*.

2.1. Living to Fulfill the Duty as a Son

In his letter to Ren An, Sima Qian reflected on his decision to undergo castration after being convicted rather than committing suicide. He wrote, "Although I am ashamed to have castrated myself, I did it to avoid the guilt of execution. If I had been executed, then my father's line would have been cut off, and my name would have been disgraced. If I had not completed my work, then I would not have fulfilled my obligation to my ancestors [2]". This suggests that Sima Qian's decision to accept castration was motivated by a desire to protect his family's reputation, fulfill his duty as a son, and undertake the unfulfilled ambition of his father to write a definitive history of the Chinese past [1]. It also highlights Sima Qian's dedication to completing his work on the historical record, which he viewed as a crucial aspect of his duty to his ancestors.

2.2. Living to Fulfill the Duty as a Historian

In his letter to Ren An, Sima Qian wrote, "In ancient times, many people died for their principles, but few sacrificed their own bodies. I am ashamed that I cannot be one of the former. However, I can still contribute to the world with my writing, and this is why I continue to work on my history despite my castration [2]". Sima Qian's experience as a historian influenced how he approached history, and he saw himself not only as a historian but also as a custodian of Chinese cultural heritage. He believed that it was essential to maintain high moral standards and give an unbiased and honest account of past events for the benefit of future generations [3].

Sima Qian stressed in his letter to Ren An the value of keeping historical records for future generations. He wrote, "I consider it my duty to transmit to posterity the records of the past in all their completeness [2]". He believed that if he completed *Records of the Grand Historian*, people can learn from past mistakes and avoid repeating them or learn valuable lessons from the people in the past.

In ancient times, people were taught that it was essential to have children in order to keep their family's blood. Just like Sima Qian said to Ren An, "No action more loathsome than one that brings dishonor upon one's ancestors, and no degradation greater than castration [2]". However, Sima Qian still accepted castration, which means that he could not have offspring of himself. But, as a historian, if he completed *Records of the Grand Historian*, it would be beneficial for future generations, who would become his children as they accept his thoughts.

3. Sima Qian's Writing Principles

Sima Qian's self-portrait in his own writing is complex. In his historical record, Sima Qian portrays himself as a loyal servant of the Han dynasty and a devoted scholar who is committed to preserving

the cultural heritage of his ancestors. However, some scholars have argued that Sima Qian's depiction of himself is heavily influenced by the political climate of the Han dynasty and may not be entirely accurate. For example, some critics have suggested that Sima Qian downplayed his own role in the events he describes in his historical record in order to avoid drawing the public's attention or attracting censure from the imperial court because Sima Qian did not agree with the official history of China that was written by the government, as he thought it was unfair and did not include all the important details. Instead, he chose to write a more thorough and detailed history that would give a more complete and honest picture of China's past. In his letter to Ren An, Sima Qian explains that he intentionally did not use the official Court History, but rather looked for other sources of information, to ensure that his account was fair and impartial [2]. Overall, Sima Qian's goal was to provide an accurate and complete representation of Chinese history.

Sima Qian's dedication to being accurate and fair is one of the things that makes his writing stand out. Sima Qian was very dedicated to making sure his historical writing was truthful and unbiased. He believed that it was the historian's responsibility to document events exactly as they happened, without taking sides or showing favoritism to any particular group of people. In a letter to Ren An, he wrote that he felt his records were not completely neutral [2]. Sima Qian understood that his writing was not without flaws, but he worked hard to make sure it was as honest and objective as he could make it. The Qin dynasty ended after 206 BCE. The Han dynasty which succeeded it changed many things but not the structure of state administration. At cultural level there was a re-flourishing of Confucian philosophy and Confucianism became the official doctrine of the state [4]. Instead of accepting the official court history, Sima Qian created a more detailed and objective record of Chinese history, because he believed in the importance of being loyal and honest, according to Confucian values. He also thought it was his responsibility as a historian to write the truth, whether it was good or bad for those in power. Sima Qian believed it was wrong to flatter people in power, and in his letter to Ren An, he wrote, "I always stick to my principles [2]". He also said that "It is obvious that I have merely followed expedience and tried to please others, achieving nothing that deserves either praise or blame [2]". His decision to reject the official court history was based on his personal beliefs and values, which showed his strong commitment to the truth.

4. Influences of *Records of the Grand Historian*

4.1. The Influence on Chinese History, Literature, and Culture

The impact of Sima Qian's work, *Records of the Grand Historian*, on Chinese history has been proven in many parts of the world. Sima Qian creates a complex structure for historical writing which influences all subsequent official historiography in China [5]. It has been a helpful resource for people who are interested in learning about Chinese history, including scholars and students. It is influential in shaping the way that Chinese history was understood and studied for centuries to come.

Sima Qian's influence can be seen not just in the field of history, but also in other areas like literature and art. For instance, *Records of the Grand Historian* has been recognized as a great historical masterpiece in Chinese. It has also been a standard against which all later histories would be measured as well as a model for large-scale historical composition, not only in China but also in all East Asian countries influenced by the Chinese literary tradition [1].

Apart from the influence on historical writing, *Records of the Grand Historian* has also been essential in safeguarding and passing on Chinese customs and beliefs. By creating a thorough and meticulous record of Chinese history, Sima Qian made certain that future generations could learn about the past and have access to an abundance of facts and insights. This has helped to maintain the persistence and liveliness of Chinese culture and traditions.

4.2. The Influence on Global Cultural Memory

Furthermore, Sima Qian's work can be seen as an effort to construct a national identity and cultural memory for China. Cultural memory refers to the personal preservation of texts, images, and rites from various societies and eras that are intended for reuse. It cultivates this storage to preserve cultural heritage, stabilize its self-image, and deliver a collectively shared knowledge [6]. It is an important aspect of human history, as it allows people to understand how different cultures have evolved over time and how they have influenced one another. By documenting the history of China and its people, Sima Qian helped to create a sense of shared cultural heritage and identity among the Chinese people. In the case of Sima Qian, his work on the historical record can be seen as a significant contribution to Chinese cultural memory.

Sima Qian's efforts to preserve and transmit Chinese culture were not only significant for Chinese cultural memory but also for world history. Sima Qian's work *Records of the Grand Historian* is one of the earliest and most comprehensive histories of any nation. It is the first systematized historical text of its type and has a significant impact on the development of Chinese prose and historiography [7]. It sets a standard for historical writing that would be emulated by historians around the world for centuries to come [8].

Sima Qian's work also contributes to the development of global cultural memory. As trade and communication between different cultures increase over time, the need to understand and appreciate other cultures becomes increasingly important. Sima Qian's work provides a valuable window into Chinese culture and history, helping to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture among people in other parts of the world.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Sima Qian's choice to accept the punishment of castration and complete *Records of the Grand Historian* was made under his determination to live to fulfill his duty as a son as well as a historian. In other words, he believed that he was responsible to keep his family's reputation and make contributions to later generations so that they could have an accurate image of the past history and learn from mistakes. During his writing of *Records of the Grand Historian*, he adhered to the principles of being accurate and objective, strongly committed to preserving complete and honest historical records. His decision to reject the official court history and write a more comprehensive and unbiased account of Chinese history demonstrated his courage and integrity as a historian. Sima Qian's Confucian values of loyalty and integrity played a crucial role in his decision-making and his work, and he saw himself not only as a historian but also as a custodian of Chinese cultural heritage. His masterpiece *Records of the Grand Historian* has a significant influence on Chinese historiography and global cultural memory. His contributions to the study of Chinese history will continue to be valued and studied for generations to come.

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