

Analysis of the Tragic Implications of the Historical Records

Longxi Hu^{1,a,*}

¹Bates College, Lewiston, 04240, US

a. hulongxi0123@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: The *Historical Records* is an important work in Chinese history. It not only has an outstanding significance in the field of history but also plays a very important role in many other fields. As the first chronicle of Chinese history, the *Historical Records* is complementary in its historical and literary achievements, and the tragedy contained in it is one of the expressions of this connection. This paper starts from the literary aspect of the *Historical Records*, focuses on the tragic implications it contains, and analyzes its tragic implications in the context of its association with the author Sima Qian as well as its connection with the field of history. The paper concludes that the literary value of the *Historical Records* is also worthy to be emphasized by future generations, and that the tragic implication, as a part of its literary character, is one of the features of the *Historical Records* that cannot be neglected.

Keywords: the *Historical Records*, Sima Qian, tragic implications, literariness

1. Introduction

The *Historical Records* is the first chronicle of Chinese history, and it has very high value in the field of historical research. However, it is not the only title that has been recognized by later generations: “The last song of the historians, the unrhymed ‘Li Sao’” (“史家之绝唱，无韵之离骚”) is a phrase from Lu Xun, a modern Chinese author. By comparing the *Historical Records* to the unrhymed Li Sao, he affirmed that the *Historical Records* also possessed outstanding and important value in the field of literature. Sima Qian, as a historian, wrote the *Historical Records* with the strict standard of recording history, and it is this standard of writing, which pursues objectivity and truthfulness, that portrays the historical characters more profoundly, magnifies the tragedy of the characters’ experiences and stories, and makes the tragic implications more realistic and concrete.

Engels defined tragedy as “the tragic conflict between the necessary demands of history and the impossibility of realizing those demands [1].” This paper carries on this argument that “tragedy” and “history” are interrelated and the idea that “tragedy” is, to some extent, in conflict with the development of history. This articulation of connection and conflict coupled with the embodiment of the tragic spirit is also an important reason why the *Historical Records*, as a historical biography, has such high literary value. This paper analyzes the tragic spirit contained in the *Historical Records* from three aspects. The first aspect is the classification and analysis of the stories of the characters in the *Historical Records*, that is, the exploration of the tragic characters and plots; the second aspect is the connection between the *Historical Records* and its author, that is, Sima Qian’s emotional investment as the author and his influence on this work; the third aspect is the historical characteristics that the

Historical Records possesses and the way in which being a historical biography influences and supports the tragic implications it contains, that is, the complementarity of historical and literary value.

2. Tragic Implications of the *Historical Records* in Terms of the Character

The tragedy embedded in the text of the *Historical Records* comes to a large extent from the characters and stories, and Sima Qian's objective and unbiased way of narration allows this tragedy to be presented and emphasized. For example, at the beginning of the book, Bo Yi and Shu Qi, when they encountered Emperor Wu of Zhou, who was crusading against Emperor Zhou of the Shang Dynasty, said bluntly: "Can one be called filial when one's father dies and does not bury him, but instead immediately goes to war? As a vassal, can one be called righteous for killing a sovereign [2]?" Taigong praised them for their righteousness and justice and thus let them have a chance to live. However, as the people of the Shang Dynasty, after the establishment of the Zhou Dynasty, they thought that it was "violence for violence" and refused to eat the food of the Zhou Dynasty, so they died of starvation in the Shouyang Mountains in the end. The *Historical Records* spans a wide range of time and social dimensions, so it contains a rich variety of characters. There are many people who are more prominent, more successful, and more historically significant than Bo Yi and Shu Qi, but Sima Qian still chose to start the *Historical Records* with the stories of these two. The biographies of Bo Yi and Shu Qi set a tragic tone at the beginning of the *Historical Records*, and this tragedy arises precisely from the conflict between the inevitable trend of historical development and personal choice. Such choices are often made out of benevolence, morality, and faith, which are the embodiment of good personal qualities and are also valued and respected in traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, once the choice conflicts with the background of the times, the meaning of the tragedy is magnified.

There are many other examples of the same kind, such as Yu Rang, who swallowed charcoal and assassinated Zhao Xiangzi in order to repay those who were kind to him; Shang Yang, who pushed forward the reforms of the Qin Dynasty and played an indelible role in its subsequent unification, but because the reformation touched on the interests of the old society, he was finally executed with the punishment of splitting the body into five pieces by five horses; Han Xin, who made countless achievements in the battle for the establishment of the Han Dynasty and possessed outstanding military and personal abilities, finally died because of the emperor's suspicion; Xiang Yu, the king of Western Chu, one of the important figures in the overthrow of the Qin Dynasty, fled after his failed fight with Liu Bang for the world, choosing to give up the hope of life and commit suicide [3,4]. Many of the stories of the characters in the *Historical Records* end in tragedy, but it was not intentional on Sima Qian's part; he was just honestly recording the truth of history as he found it. Instead of being too judgmental in the process of recording, Sima Qian left it up to the reader to experience the story on their own, and this way of writing creates a two-tiered tragic reading experience on behalf of the reader. From the emotional dimension, all these characters have their own highlights in their lives, and these significant moments have important or positive significance either for individuals or for the times, but all their stories end in tragedy, which gives readers a greater emotional gap, resulting in the first layer of tragic expression. From a broader historical perspective, the choices of individuals may have far-reaching significance, but individuals are too small and people are confined to the society at that time, which often makes such significance very difficult to be discovered, leading to the value of individuals being denied by the times. This is the second layer of tragic meaning. Under the background of different dynasties, the characters from different classes all show similar tragedies under Sima Qian's narrative of the confrontation between individuals and the times, but Sima Qian shows the positive will of the historical characters with his own objective narration, and he shows his point of view that he would not define the value of individual's life based

on the success or failure of the end. At the same time, these tragic stories reveal the everlasting relevance and conflict between the individual and history.

3. Tragic Implications of the *Historical Records* in Terms of the Author Sima Qian

Secondly, Sima Qian's ideas and opinions deeply influenced the creation of the *Historical Records*, so the author is also one of the non-negligible sources of the tragedy embedded in the *Historical Records*. Sima Qian's description of his own experiences and emotions was detailed in his letter to Ren An, in which he also explained why he chose to continue the writing of the *Historical Records* and expressed the significance and importance of the *Historical Records* to him. After Sima Qian suffered from cruel punishment and psychological torture, the *Historical Records* became his spiritual support and life goal, moreover, his "reason for living". It means that the creation of the *Historical Records* carries a lot of heavy emotions of Sima Qian. His creation was "angry" and "persistent". He compared himself to the characters in history, "Emperor Wen of Zhou was detained before he expanded and wrote the Zhou Yi; Confucius wrote the Spring and Autumn when he was distressed; Qu Yuan became exiled before he wrote Li Sao; Zuo Qiuming lost his eyesight and wrote the Guo Yu. Sun Bin was amputated his kneecaps and The Art of War was written; Lv Buwei was relegated to Shu, and only then The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lv was circulated in later generations; Han Fei was imprisoned in Qin and wrote Shuo Nan (Speaking of Difficulties) and Gu Fen (Lonely Anger); and most of the 300 poems of the Book of Songs were written by some sages to express their indignation [5]." Sima Qian believes that the reason for the creation of these classic works is because the sages encountered unfair things, had pent-up emotions in their hearts that they wanted to express, and had unfulfilled goals that they wanted to make known to future generations [5]. In other words, all these works carry the ideals and aspirations of their authors, and the *Historical Records* is also the crystallization of Sima Qian's personal thoughts and experiences. Because Sima Qian's creative concept itself carries an aesthetic sense of tragedy, it also paints a tragic but inspirational undertone to the *Historical Records*.

Sima Qian's approach to the writing of the *Historical Records* also insinuates his personal feelings [6]. By presenting the stories of historical figures in an objective and complete way, he was appreciating and respecting the qualities of those who came before him, as well as expecting those who will come after him. Because Sima Qian also saw his own shadow in the stories of these historical figures, he recorded the encounters of these figures in fair words, and also hoped that his own lofty ideals would be understood and his own experiences would be treated fairly in the records of his descendants. As summarized in the first argument, Sima Qian does not judge the value of historical figures by the success or failure of their endings; even if the characters' endings are not perfect, they have made great efforts and sacrifices to achieve their ideals in the process, and so the characters themselves are noble in quality [7]. When posterity interprets Sima Qian's works, they will inevitably analyze them in relation to his personal experience: although the punishment he suffered was humiliating, his qualities had nothing to do with the flesh. This is also one of the ways in which Sima Qian puts his emotions into the creation of the *Historical Records*. Even though his experience was tragic, he followed the example of his ancient predecessors by transforming his tragic experience and emotions into greater ideals and aspirations. This struggle in the face of society is full of tragic meaning, but it is also full of significance. Sima Qian, as the author, resonated deeply with the experiences of the historical figures he recorded and reached an emotional agreement with them. The *Historical Records* is his helpless compromise with the times, but also his angry revolt against destiny.

Although Sima Qian's personal experience and the tragedy of the *Historical Records* play a role in mirroring each other, it is worthy to note that Sima Qian's ideas and experiences also limit the interpretation of the work to a certain extent. As the author in *Lost in Tradition* mentions the

relationship between the creator and the work when analyzing the Book of Songs, “No original author had ever owned the songs, and hence no song could be discredited by finding fault with its author [8].” The *Historical Records* could not find the meaning of its existence in the abstract, imaginative poetic content itself as the Book of Songs did; it was bound up with the author’s creative thoughts and personal feelings.

4. Tragic Implications of the *Historical Records* in Terms of the Historical Background

Last but not least, the tragedy of the *Historical Records* is not a stand-alone element; it exists while being stimulated and amplified by other characteristics. In the discussion of the definition of “tragedy” at the beginning of this paper, the connection between “history” and “tragedy” is mentioned. If this connection continues to be explored in depth, it will be found that, as one of the main subjects of the *Historical Records* and because of its large and deep social nature, “history” sets off the tragic emotions carried by the *Historical Records*. The record of history is a grand account, and in such an expansive context, the stories of individuals are often very small and fragile. As a character-based historical work, the *Historical Records* reflects the magnitude of the “times” from the point of view of the individual characters. Whether Shang Yang or Wu Qi, who tried to make changes with the social changes, or Bo Yi or Shu Qi, who tried to resist the wheel of the times, they all ended up in a tragic situation.

On the other hand, the time dimension recorded in the *Historical Records* spans the change of many dynasties, but under the development of society, similar tragic experiences still happened to different characters in different dynasties. Old ministers who died insisting on the rites and authority of the previous dynasty, such as Xun Yu during the Three Kingdoms period; meritorious ministers who were not trusted by the emperor, such as Han Xin during the Han Dynasty; and underclassmen who attempted to overthrow authority, such as Chen Sheng and Wu Guang, to name but a few. In the *Old Book of Tang* (《旧唐书》), Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty said, “Using history as a mirror, one can know the rise and fall of dynasties”. History is a mirror to scrutinize the present. People can find experiences and lessons in history, which is one of the important meanings of historical documents. Sima Qian also mentioned in the Letter to Ren An that his ambition in writing the *Historical Records* was “to explore the relationship between heaven and man, to understand the changes of the past and present, and to form my own school of opinion.” However, when people look back at history, they find that it is like a cycle full of fatalism. Even though history has summarized the experience for people, similar tragedies still continue to happen. The tragedy of individual destiny is further emphasized in the context of history, and the repetition of similar tragedies elevates the tragedy of individual destiny to the social or even cultural dimension. This is the unique tragic nature of the *Historical Records* as a historical work that belongs to the sense of historical gravity.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Historical Records*, as a work of history, is also highly valuable in the field of literature. The tragic implications it contains reflect the conflict between history and personal destiny, and highlight the author’s reflections on the experiences and values of historical characters. Sima Qian’s commentary is objective rather than utilitarian in discussing the success or failure of the hero. He focuses more on the essential behavior and dignity of the individual, and this humanistic aesthetic enriches the image of the historical figures and makes the tragic properties of the characters more moving. The tragedy of the *Historical Records* is very coherent from the content of the text to the emotion of the author, and its tragic nature has been greatly sublimated from the dimension of history. Tragedy fulfills the literary value of the *Historical Records* and gives it a unique and majestic sense of sublimity. This paper focuses on the literary perspective, enriching the study of the *Historical*

Records in the field of literature. However, this paper is a bit insufficient in exploring the application of tragedy in other texts and is only limited to the framework of the *Historical Records*. In future research, it is possible to compare other texts with tragic implications and make a broader exploration of the literary tragedy of historical texts.

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