

# A COMPANION TO GLOBAL HISTORICAL THOUGHT

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## CHAPTER TWO

# Classical Chinese Historical Thought

*MICHAEL PUETT*

The writing of history has long been seen as a crucial cultural exercise in China. The issue was not simply to write down what happened in the past – although what happened in the past was certainly seen as tremendously important. The concern was rather to understand the past, to see if there might be larger patterns to explain what occurred, and to relate oneself properly to those patterns. Those who could explicate the past and teach future generations how to orient themselves accordingly were granted tremendous cultural significance. Indeed, Confucius, widely recognized as the greatest sage in Chinese history, is said to have written only one text – an annals of his home state of Lu. And this text came to be defined as one of the great classics of the tradition, subjected to extraordinarily careful readings.

The result of this cultural focus was a tremendously rich historiographical tradition. Much of the intellectual and interpretive work that would in other cultures be devoted to philosophical writings would in China often be placed at least in part into the historiographical tradition.

### **The Mandate of Heaven and the Dynastic Cycle**

Some of the key issues of debate in the Chinese historiographical tradition are apparent from an early period. In the middle part of the eleventh century BCE, a group called the Zhou defeated the Shang, the dominant power in the north China plain. In texts written after the conquest and later collected together into a work called the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu*), the Zhou placed the conquest within a larger vision of history rooted in the behavior of rulers and the actions of Heaven. According to this vision, Heaven was a moral deity that decided who should rule all under Heaven based upon the moral qualities of the humans in question. More specifically, Heaven would give the most moral individual in the land the mandate to rule. That mandate would be passed down from father to son until a bad ruler emerged in the dynasty. Heaven would then withdraw the

mandate from that dynasty and bestow it on another dynasty. This general vision of history, based upon the bestowal and removal of the Mandate by Heaven, would be called the dynastic cycle.

In the case at hand, the Zhou claimed that Heaven had centuries before bestowed the mandate on Yu, who thus founded the Xia dynasty. When a bad king emerged among the Xia, Heaven withdrew that mandate and bestowed it instead upon the Shang. Now, the Zhou claimed, Shang rule had also degenerated, and thus Heaven was bestowing the mandate upon the Zhou.

Such a vision of the Mandate of Heaven would become a key part of subsequent Chinese political theory, and so would the notion of a dynastic cycle become a key part of the later historiographical tradition. It is important to note, however, that in both cases we are dealing not with assumptions but with consciously formulated doctrines that would thereafter be associated with the three dynasties of the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou. Later rulers who wished to emphasize their connections to these early states would appeal to the Mandate of Heaven and the dynastic cycle model, whereas those who opposed it would make very different appeals.

### The Historian as Sage

The subsequent breakdown of the Zhou also marked the end of the Three Dynasties period. When the Zhou weakened, it was not replaced by another dynasty. On the contrary, the realm broke down into several competing states. From the point of view of those who saw the period of the Three Dynasties as a great era, this was seen as a period of decline, a period when the realm was no longer unified by a single ruler.

Among those who viewed history this way was Confucius (551–479 BCE). Confucius would later be credited with editing materials from the Zhou dynasty in order to transmit them to later history – the *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of Changes*, and the *Record of the Rites*. As we have seen, the first articulation of the Mandate of Heaven can be found in several chapters of the *Book of Documents*. Since Confucius would later be seen as the editor of the *Book of Documents*, the vision of a dynastic cycle and a Mandate of Heaven would come to be associated with Confucius.

The only text that Confucius was credited with having written, however, was the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a chronicle of the state of Lu from 722 to 481. The text of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* reads like a dry chronicle. But, according to later readers, it should be read as a complex work, with a hidden critique of the age following the breakdown of the Zhou.

Mencius (372–289 BCE), a later follower of Confucius, read the *Spring and Autumn Annals* in precisely this way:

As the generations declined and the way became obscure, heterodox teachings and violent practices arose. There were instances of ministers killing their rulers and sons killing their fathers. Confucius was worried and created (*zuo*) the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is an undertaking for a Son of Heaven. This is why Confucius said: “Those who understand me will do so through the *Spring and Autumn Annals*; those who condemn me will do so through the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.” (*Mengzi*, 3B/9)

For Mencius, Confucius was a sage – a figure able to understand the world properly and see how to bring order to it. However, Confucius was not recognized as a sage in his

own day. Accordingly, the only way that Confucius could bring order to the world was to write the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, laying out the principles of proper behavior as a model for future figures.

In other words, for Mencius, creating a work of history is the work of a sage. The word that Mencius uses for “create” here is *zuo* – a term that Mencius feels should be reserved for the work of a sage. Confucius himself had denied that he was a sage and a creator:

The master [Confucius] said: “Transmitting (*shu*) but not creating (*zuo*), being faithful toward and loving the ancients, I dare to compare myself with old Peng.” (*Lunyu*, 7/1)

Mencius, in saying that Confucius had created the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, is revealing that Confucius was in fact a creator and was in fact a sage.

These points would reverberate throughout the later Chinese historiographical tradition. First of all, in terms of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* itself, it would mean that what would appear to be simply a chronicle of events in the state of Lu would on the contrary be read as a work of tremendous complexity, with lengthy commentaries written to explain how, through the word choices used and the ways that events were narrated, Confucius was revealing larger patterns in history and providing a model for future generations.

Second, it would open up a debate for later authors and readers of historical works. Is, for example, a given author of a historical work simply trying to transmit a record of what happened, or is the author making a complex argument through the way that historical work is narrated? In the vocabulary of the debate, is the author simply transmitting (*shu*) or creating (*zuo*)? The former would be the work of a scribe, while the latter would be the work of a sage. Following the denials of Confucius, most subsequent authors would claim to be simply narrating events, but many would, through that denial, hope to be read as doing much more. And later readers would often evaluate works of history (either positively or negatively, depending on the point of view of the reader) based upon the degree to which they were or were not simply narrating the past or creating a significant argument.

The third point relates to the goal of historical writing and the nature of the argument that an author might be seeking to make in an historical work. If writing a text like the *Spring and Autumn Annals* would be the equivalent of the work of a ruler, it meant that such a work would have the same function as rulership. But instead of ordering the world through one’s actions and leaving a model for future generations through one’s accomplishments, a sage like Confucius would write such a work to explicate the patterns of proper behavior for future generations. So one should study the work to learn how to respond well or poorly to situations.

This had a further corollary as well for those who wished to work within this tradition: the patterns that one could find in a work like the *Spring and Autumn Annals* are, in a sense, timeless. One would read the *Spring and Autumn Annals* not, for example, to find out what happened in the state of Lu after the decline of the Zhou court; one read it to find timeless principles for proper behavior.

The four texts that Confucius was credited with having edited (the *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of Changes*, and the *Record of the Rites*), as well as the one he was credited as having written (the *Spring and Autumn Annals*), would later be defined as the Five Classics, and would thereafter become a key part of the curriculum for China

and ultimately much of East Asia. Associated with Confucius, therefore, would be a sense that the vision of history laid out at the early Zhou court was based upon a set of timeless principles that should guide behavior in the future as well.

### Anecdotes

Two other influential works related to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* were the *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuozhuan*) and *Discourses on the States* (*Guoyu*). Both of these are collections of historical anecdotes dealing with roughly the same time period as the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Unlike the chronicle form of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Zuo Commentary* and the *Discourses on the States* consist of stories, often with lengthy dialogues. Moreover, unlike the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the authoring of the *Zuo Commentary* and the *Discourses on the States* was not associated with claims of sagehood. By at least the early Han, both works were ascribed to Zuo Qiuming (fifth century), and both were read as works supplementing and providing historical background to the sagely work of Confucius. The *Zuo Commentary* was read as a commentary to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, in which the stories served to provide historical background to the events chronicled in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, while the *Discourses on the States* were series of stories dealing with other states not covered in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

Doubt has long been thrown on the ascribed authorship of these texts. David Schaberg (2002), for example, has hypothesized that these stories and anecdotes arose out of followers of Confucius and were designed to provide a moralistic reading of history as well as a set of models for argumentation at court. Regardless of the actual authorship of the materials, however, they would play a significant role in later Chinese historiography. Unlike the dry chronicle format of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the stories of the *Zuo Commentary* and the *Discourses on the States* were carefully crafted pieces that would become a model for later historians seeking a more colorful style. Moreover, although they could be read simply as providing background to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, they could also be read as complex stories in their own right that needed to be carefully interpreted to tease out the hidden patterns. This too would provide a potential model for future historians.

### The Beginning of Imperial Historiography

The end of the self-perceived period of disorder, when the Zhou had declined but had not been succeeded by another unifying dynasty, came to an end in 221 BCE, when the state of Qin unified the various states and began a new dynasty. However, the vision of history that was emphasized in the Qin court was not based upon that argued at the beginning of the Zhou dynasty. Instead of claiming that Heaven had removed the mandate from a previous dynasty and bestowed it upon the Qin, the Qin on the contrary claimed that the formation of the new dynasty was entirely the work of the founder himself.

This new imperial vision of history can be seen clearly in the inscriptions that the First Emperor set up after the conquest. The First Emperor declares himself a sage, creating (*zuo*) a new order. Heaven is not mentioned. Moreover, he claims not to be returning to a virtuous moment achieved at the beginning of the previous dynasties but

rather to be creating a better world that fully superseded the accomplishments of the previous dynasties:

It is the twenty-eighth year. The First Emperor has created (*zuo*) a new beginning.  
 He has put in order the laws, standards, and principles for the myriad things . . .  
 All under Heaven is unified in heart and yielding in will.  
 Implements have a single measure, and graphs are written in the same way . . .  
 He has rectified and given order to the different customs . . .  
 His accomplishments surpass those of the five thearchs . . . (*Shiji*, 6.245)

Unlike Confucius, the First Emperor is a sage who does rule the realm, and it is therefore his accomplishments themselves that will serve as a model for later ages:

. . . The great sage created (*zuo*) order, established and settled the laws and standards, and made manifest the relations and principles . . .  
 He universally bestowed and clarified the laws to bind all under Heaven and to stand eternally as a righteous pattern.  
 Great indeed! Everyone within the divisions will receive and accord with the intent of the sage.  
 The numerous ministers praise his accomplishments, requesting to carve them on stone and display them and hand them down as a constant model. (*Shiji*, 6.249)

This is, in a sense, an anti-historical vision: the model for the future is not to be found in a sagely reading of the past but rather in the accomplishments of this single great sagely ruler. In response to critics arguing that the Qin could not succeed by so dramatically shifting from the past, the First Emperor ordered the books burned to prevent anyone from using the past to criticize this new order (*Shiji*, 6.255)

Moreover, the Qin rejected the dynastic cycle model as well. As we can already see from the ruler's title, the ruler declared himself to be the first emperor. His son would be the second, and continuing onward. So it would be a dynasty, but it would never fall: the line would continue for ten thousand generations (*Shiji*, 6.236). Given the lack of references to a Mandate of Heaven, there would appear to be no possibility that Heaven might at some point remove a mandate from the Qin and replace it with another dynasty. In short, the Qin claimed to be breaking from the Bronze Age model of a dynastic cycle altogether and instead creating a new, enduring empire.

### Sima Qian

Despite its extravagant claims, the Qin fell in 206 BCE, soon after the death of the First Emperor. At the beginning of the ensuing Han dynasty, a debate developed as to whether to return to the older models of the past or to continue the imperium of the Qin. During the reign of Emperor Wu (156–87 BCE), the debate was decisively won by those supporting a continuation of the Qin model of an enduring empire.

This re-creation of the empire had numerous cultural repercussions as well. Just as in the political sphere the sense was that a new form of statecraft was being forged, bigger and better than anything that had existed in antiquity, so in the cultural sphere were authors trying to write texts grander, larger, and far more comprehensive than anything previously written.

In the area of historical writing, these characteristics held sway as well. This same moment that witnessed the great expansion of the Han empire also helped to generate one of the most potent voices in the Chinese historiographical tradition. Sima Qian (ca. 145–87 BCE), a contemporary of Emperor Wu, is the author of the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*), one of the greatest examples of Chinese historiography from the classical period. The *Records of the Grand Historian* was intended to be a full history of China up until the time of Sima Qian himself – by far the grandest and most exhaustive historical work yet attempted in the Chinese tradition.

In authoring the work, Sima Qian explicitly played upon the associations of Confucius with the authoring of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The fact that Sima Qian would write such a work might imply that he thought himself to be a sage at least as great as Confucius, and that he thought his ruler, Emperor Wu, deserved the same level of criticism that was accorded by Confucius to the period after the decline of the Zhou.

In his “Postface” to the *Records of the Grand Historian*, Sima Qian takes up these issues directly. He narrates a dialogue between himself and the minister Hu Sui:

The High Minister Hu Sui asked: “Why is it that, in ancient times, Confucius created (*zuo*) the *Spring and Autumn Annals*?” The Taishigong [i.e., Sima Qian] responded: “I have heard that Master Dong [Zhongshu] said, ‘When the way of the Zhou declined and fell to waste, Confucius was the Supervisor of Justice in Lu . . . He showed the rights and wrongs of two hundred and forty-two years so as to make a guide and standard for all under Heaven.’” (*Shiji*, 120.3297)

When Hu Sui then points out that the parallel would imply that Sima Qian was therefore authoring a work of history to criticize his age and ruler as well, Sima Qian immediately denies that his history should be compared with the *Spring and Autumn Annals*:

What I am referring to is transmitting (*shu*) ancient affairs and arranging and ordering the traditions passed down through the generations. It is not what can be called creating (*zuo*), and for you to compare this with the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is mistaken. (*Shiji*, 120.3299–3300)

But such a statement that he is merely transmitting and not creating is a clear play on Confucius’s claim of merely being a transmitter and not a creator. Just as Confucius, a true sage, would claim that he is a mere transmitter, Sima Qian, through the same wording, implies the same. And, like Confucius, the implication would appear to be that Sima Qian is implicitly proclaiming himself to be a sage. This work of history, Sima Qian is claiming, is, like the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, making an argument, and it should be read with the same care as was being granted to Confucius’s work. And the critiques of Emperor Wu in the work were clear as well.

But several differences with the *Spring and Autumn Annals* are immediately apparent. To begin with, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is a straightforward chronicle of a defined period of history from a single (and rather small) state. Sima Qian’s text, on the other hand, is a sprawling, massive work, covering all of history up to that point. Although, like the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Records of the Grand Historian* is critical of the age in which it was authored, it nonetheless partakes of that age in another sense: like many other early Han works, it is a grand, comprehensive text that is perhaps at least in part hoping to supersede all previous examples of the genre – perhaps including the *Spring and Autumn Annals* itself.



Moreover, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* was a spare work that overtly reads as a rather dry chronicle of events. The style of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, on the contrary, is extremely passionate and compelling, and the storytelling is tremendously complex and nuanced. It reads far more like the *Zuo Commentary* than the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Here too, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* seems less like a model Sima Qian was trying to follow than a work Sima Qian was hoping to best.

The format of the text is radically different from the *Spring and Autumn Annals* as well. Instead of a simple chronology of events, the *Records of the Grand Historian* is arranged in a much more complex way. The first section of the *Records* is the annals section, which gives the basic annals of the rulers and major political actors of China from antiquity through the early Han. The next section is the chronological tables, which organizes the chronologies of the various events of the past. Following this is the treatises section, focused on various topics such as economic policy and sacrifices. A fourth section is devoted to the major hereditary houses and major figures. The final section is on the biographies of major individuals.

This organization had several implications. First of all, the history was not concerned simply with high-level political actors. In the history as well were included, for example, assassins and merchants. Moreover, it allowed Sima Qian to bring in another element to historiography, namely that of perspective. Given the ordering, it meant that significant political events would appear in several chapters in different sections, each written in terms of the perspective of distinct actors. Sima Qian could thus bring in very complex arguments about events by showing the reader that same event from numerous different perspectives.

Another difference from the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is crucial as well. Sima Qian closes his chapters with an evaluation of the topic or figure in question. These statements are introduced by the statement, “The Grand Historian states . . .” Sima Qian thus grants to himself the right to make explicit comments concerning the events of the past – something certainly not seen in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

Perhaps most importantly, the vision of history presented in the *Records of the Grand Historian* is not a moral one. There is no claim that Heaven rewards the good and punishes the bad. Indeed, the first chapter of his section on biographies, “The Biography of Bo Yi,” rejects such a view, explicitly critiquing Confucius and the Classics (*Shiji*, 120.2121).

Moreover (and relatedly, since the view would undercut the claim of an overarching Mandate of Heaven), there is no claim that history is essentially cyclical, as one would find in the discussions of the Mandate of Heaven in the *Book of Documents*. Indeed, the overall view seems best described as accumulative: actions are taken by particular actors in response to particular situations, and those actions have consequences for subsequent actors who must then deal with the new contexts that have been created (Puett 2001: 273n98). The rise of empire for Sima Qian seems very much along these lines. The introduction of empire has resulted in the formation of a world now very different from antiquity. Once it has been created, one cannot simply return to the practices of the past. Gone, in other words, are the views found in so many readings of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* that timeless principles can be found through the study of the past.

Sima Qian is indeed making a complex argument concerning the past, but it is hardly one that fits within the framework of the *Book of Documents* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

## Ban Gu

One of the earliest critics of Sima Qian's method of historiography was Ban Gu (32–92). Living at the beginning of the Eastern Han dynasty, Ban Gu authored the *History of the Han*. The goal of the work was to write a comprehensive account of the Han dynasty up to 25 CE. Unlike Sima Qian, therefore, the *History of the Han* was not intended as a full account of all of Chinese history. Moreover, Ban Gu strongly opposed the sagely pretensions of Sima Qian. In his biography of Sima Qian, for example, Ban Gu explicitly criticized Sima Qian's failure to work within the historiographical guidelines of Confucius.

Another key, and for Ban Gu related, difference lies in their respective attitudes toward the Han. Sima Qian was highly critical of the empire of Emperor Wu, and Ban Gu fully shared Sima Qian's negative appraisal of Emperor Wu. But Ban Gu lived in a very different period of the Han dynasty than Sima Qian did. By the end of the Western Han, the imperial vision of Emperor Wu had fallen dramatically out of favor. In the 30s BCE, the Han court had turned toward modeling itself on the Five Classics, edited and (in the case of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*) authored by Confucius. For Ban Gu, support for the Han (apart from figures like Emperor Wu) and support for Confucius went hand in hand.

Gone, therefore, in the *History of the Han* are implicit (even through denials) of sagacity on the part of the author. Gone as well, as we have seen, is the attempt to write a comprehensive account of all of Chinese history. The style of the text is also notably more humble and restrained. And, finally, absent is any claim of significant discontinuities in history. The Qin, for Ban Gu, does not seem to represent any significant break; the principles of governance are essentially the same for the Han as they were for earlier dynasties, and the same patterns discerned in the texts edited and authored by Confucius hold for the present.

Nonetheless, Ban Gu did appropriate the organization of the *History of the Han* from the *Records of the Grand Historian*. Like Sima Qian's work, Ban Gu's text was accordingly divided into the same sections as the *Records of the Grand Historian*. This appropriation would have a significant impact on the later tradition: since it was brought into Ban Gu's history, the division of sections introduced by Sima Qian would be seen as legitimate by later historians working within the Confucian framework.

Ban Gu's *History of the Han* would become the most influential work for later dynastic histories. Although building on and appropriating the work of Sima Qian, Ban Gu was able to create a model for how a history of a dynasty could be written in a way that would work within the framework of the *Book of Documents* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. While the *Records of the Grand Historian* would be either criticized or praised for its compelling style, complex narration, and highly individual voice, the *History of the Han* would become the model of later dynastic histories.

## Millenarian Visions

The breakdown of the Han empire in the second century helped to stimulate the emergence of a number of millenarian movements. In several texts from the second and third centuries, one finds a vision of history based on larger cosmic cycles, in which the breakdown and ultimate fall of the Han was read not simply as the end of a dynasty but rather

as the end of a much larger cosmic cycle. The current cosmic cycle was seen as coming to an end due to the improper behavior of humans.

One of the most influential of these millenarian movements was the Celestial Masters. The high god for the Celestial Masters was the Way – a higher deity than Heaven. The Way would periodically take the form of a human, called Laozi, to offer revelations to humanity. The most recent of these, according to the Celestial Masters, had occurred in 142, with a revelation to Zhang Daoling. As one of the Celestial Masters texts, “Commands and Admonitions for the Families of the Great Dao” (*Dao jia ling jie*), puts it:

Though the Han house was thus established, its last generations moved at cross-purposes to the will of the Dao. Its citizens pursued profit, and the strong fought bitterly with the weak. The Dao mourned the fate of the people, for were it once to depart, its return would be difficult. Thus did the Dao cause Heaven to bestow its pneuma, called the “newly emerged Lord Lao,” to rule the people, saying, “What are demons that the people should fear them and not place faith in the Dao?” Then Lord Lao made his bestowal on Zhang Daoling, making him Celestial Master. He was most venerable and most spiritual and so was made the master of the people. (Bokenkamp 1999: 173)

Despite this revelation, the evils of humanity could not be stopped, so the apocalypse will come anyway:

Since the evil of humanity could not be rooted out, you must first pass through war, illness, flood, drought, and even death. Your life spans have been depleted, and so it is appropriate that you must come up against these things. (Bokenkamp 1999: 173)

The followers of the Celestial Masters, however, will survive the coming catastrophe, become the seed people for the new era, and thus live to see a coming period of Great Peace:

You will see Great Peace. You will pass through the catastrophes unscathed and become the seed people of the later age. Although there will be disasters of war, illness, and flood, you will confront them without injury. (Bokenkamp 1999: 173)

This is very much a return to a cyclical vision of history, in opposition to the notion of an enduring empire so prevalent in the Qin and at times in the Han. However, the cycles here are worked out at the cosmic level, instead of being at the level of the rise and fall of human dynasties. It is also an attempt to return to having a divine power rather than human sages as being the major driving force of history. And this too is raised to a higher cosmic level. In the dynastic model, Heaven removes and bestows the mandate by sending signs to the humans. In this millenarian model, the god in question is much higher than Heaven. Moreover, this higher god works in human history by directly offering revelations to humans. The resulting texts are not products of human sages; they are sacred texts, revealed by a divine figure.

These texts from the second and third centuries are the first examples we have of a vision of history based upon divine revelation, large cosmic cycles, and apocalypse. Versions of such a vision would be picked up repeatedly by millenarian movements from then on in Chinese history.

## Empires as Dynasties

The re-creation of the empire under the Tang (618–907) was a crucial moment in Chinese history. It would also become a crucial period for the development of the Chinese historiographical tradition. By the seventh century, there were numerous competing visions of history, along with numerous competing visions of statecraft and societal organization. The successful re-formation of an empire helped to define imperial unity as the political norm in China, and the vision of history that the Tang embraced would become equally influential.

Although an empire, the Tang fully supported a vision of history based upon the *Book of Documents* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Moreover, they chose to institutionalize this vision: the Tang created a History Bureau to undertake the proper writing of history. During the Han, the histories of Sima Qian and Ban Gu were very much individual efforts. Under the Tang, the writing of history became an official imperial project.

Among the projects undertaken by the History Bureau were histories to be written for the period from the fall of the Han to the formation of the Tang. Each of these was written within a dynastic framework: each state was defined as a dynasty that rose and fell according to the moral actions of the founding and final rulers respectively. The primary model for the writing of these histories was Ban Gu's *History of Han*, a work that followed a dynastic model and was seen, unlike Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*, as working within the proper historical vision laid out by Confucius.

Another crucial activity of the Bureau was to compile records for a history of the Tang as well. The Bureau would collect documents and store them, thus implying that defining the place of the Tang in history would itself be an official imperial project.

The work of the History Bureau was not in any manner to be construed as that of a sage. The institutionalization instead involved defining the categories of knowledge and collecting the relevant material to fill in those categories. Although interpretive work undoubtedly occurred, the intent was to reduce such interpretive work as much as possible.

This fully removed the potential claim of sagehood from the writing of history. The writing was on the contrary associated with institutionalized scribal work, following the guidelines set out by the sage Confucius.

Such a vision of history thereafter became institutionalized. At the beginning of subsequent dynasties, a history of the previous dynasty would be written. That history would be read according to the dynastic model of a great founder followed by a subsequent decline. The vision of history initially developed in the *Book of Documents*, with the patterns of praise and blame that were read into the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and attributed to Confucius, along with the organizational system utilized by Ban Gu (even though first introduced by Sima Qian), thus became institutionalized as an imperial court project. Many of the characteristics of historiography that would ultimately come to be associated with China – a cyclical vision of history, based politically in the dynastic cycle, with a moral interpretation of the political actors involved in the cycle – were standardized at this point.

## Sima Guang

The last major permutation we will discuss is the *Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government* (*Zizhi tongjian*), written by Sima Guang (1019–1086). This was the first major attempt to write a comprehensive history – outside of the bounds of a

dynastic history – since Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*. Also, like Sima Qian’s great work before it, this was an individual effort, not a court-sanctioned history.

But fully absent in the text is any attempt to play the game of competitive sagacity vis-à-vis Confucius that Sima Qian had attempted. Indeed, the *Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government* is written as a continuation of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, working within the vision of history laid out by Confucius. It begins in 403 BCE and continues to 959. Moreover, Sima Guang rejects the division of sections that Sima Qian had created, and that had thereafter been adopted by Ban Gu and subsequent dynastic histories. The *Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government* is on the contrary written as a straightforward chronicle, chronologically arranged. The temporal divisions are based entirely upon the dynastic cycle model, and the figures of concern are the major political actors. In short, the *Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government*, far from being a grand, sagely work like that of Sima Qian, is on the contrary conceived as an explicit continuation of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, focused on the rise and fall of dynasties and reiterating the basic patterns of moral actions and their repercussions.

The argument behind the text, also following the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, is to provide a model to aid future rulers. By laying out the principles of what is praiseworthy and what deserves blame among previous political actors, the text will hopefully provide a guide to future rulers and ministers.

Also unlike Sima Qian’s vision, but very much like the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (at least as it had been read since the ascription of authorship to Confucius), Sima Guang held that history was not accumulative and indeed involved no significant breaks. The same principles that defined proper governance in 403 BCE equally defined it a millennium later.

## Conclusion

We have traced a complex debate concerning visions of the past in China, the role of human and divine powers in forging history, and the nature of historical change. Although a vision of a dynastic cycle would ultimately become the official state position, this was true only quite late, and in opposition to several competing visions of historical change. Moreover, several of these earlier, competing visions of history would be appropriated later by counter-state movements. In particular, the millenarian visions we have noted would play a major role in later religious movements.

Equally under debate was the nature of the historian. Was the historian a sage, self-consciously constructing a vision to educate the world, or was he (or they) simply a scribe or scribes, narrating past events by collecting the data into pre-given categories laid out by an earlier sage? The latter position was often claimed, but only as a self-conscious rejection of at least implicit claims by figures like Sima Qian to on the contrary be sages themselves.

Seeing the complexity of visions of history in China, one of the key directions for future studies lies in continuing to work through the nuances of these historical texts. With the exception of a few key texts such as the *Zuo Commentary* and the *Records of the Grand Historian*, many of the works from the Chinese historiographical tradition have been used as historical sources but have not been subjected to serious scrutiny as

complex texts in themselves. More work needs to be done in teasing out the nuances of the visions of history that are given in these works and of the complex claims of authorship that were being made.

One of the reasons so little of this work has been done is due to subsequent historical developments. In the early twentieth century, Western historiography was introduced into China. Chinese history thus came to be divided into “traditional” and “modern” periods. “Traditional” in China was read as being defined by an assumption of a cyclical vision of history, an assumption that was then broken with the Western impact and the beginning of a linear conception of history. In other words, the official court position of the later dynasties was read as an assumption for all of “traditional” China, and the complex debate concerning the nature of history and the nature of authorship was lost entirely. One of the keys now for future scholarship is to see past such a facile notion of a “traditional worldview” and on the contrary to trace out the complexity of this debate in China concerning the writing of history.

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