

The Ambivalence of Creation

*Debates Concerning
Innovation and Artifice
in Early China*

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The Tragedy of Creation: Sima Qian's Reconstruction of the Rise of Empire in Early China

Sima Qian was a court historian during the reign of Wudi and an active participant in the debates of the time.¹ His work, the *Shiji*, was intended to be a history of the entirety of China's past, beginning with Huangdi and ending with his own emperor. The text is particularly fascinating in regard to the issues that have been discussed in this study, for the historian is directly concerned with the problems of how empire came to be created and to what extent this new creation could still be seen as linked to the past. Moreover, his reconstruction of the rise of empire involved an implicit commentary on many of the issues concerning creation that had been debated for the previous few centuries.

Sima Qian's Project

In the "postface" to his work, Sima Qian stakes out some of his claims as a historian. At one point, he narrates a dialogue between himself and "High Minister Hu Sui" concerning the nature of the *Shiji* and its relationship to the classics:

High Minister Hu Sui asked: "Why is it that, in ancient times, Confucius created [*zuo*] the *Spring and Autumn Annals*?" The Taishigong [Sima Qian] responded: "I have heard that Master Dong [Zhongshu] said, 'When the way of the Zhou declined and fell to waste, Confu-

cus was the supervisor of justice in Lu. . . . He showed the rights and wrongs of 242 years so as to make a guide and standard for all under Heaven.'"²

Sima Qian thus accepts the view that Confucius was a sage who *zuo*-ed the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and he quotes Dong Zhongshu's argument that the act involved presenting the patterns of right and wrong as a model for the world. Indeed, he goes on to assert that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* "clarifies the good and bad."³ Sima Qian then praises the classics, showing how they provide a proper guide for humanity.⁴

Following this, he poses Hu Sui as questioning Sima Qian's intentions in writing the *Shiji*: if the *Spring and Autumn Annals* was written as a critique of his age, then was Sima Qian doing something similar? Sima Qian begins by asserting that the classics are not simply critiques: he mentions Fuxi's *zuo*-ing of the eight trigrams, as well as the praises given in the various classics for great figures.⁵ He then goes on to praise the greatness of Han Wudi's reign, mentioning, among other things, Wudi's performance of the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices.⁶

But then Sima Qian states that his work cannot be compared with the *Spring and Autumn Annals* anyway, because he, unlike Confucius, is simply transmitting, not creating: "What I am referring to is transmitting 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."⁷ Echoing the modesty of Confucius's statement in *Lunyu* 7/1, Sima Qian then proclaims that he is only a transmitter and thus not a sage.

In making a statement so clearly parallel to the one attributed to Confucius, Sima Qian implicitly stakes a claim to sagehood through his denial. Immediately thereafter, however, Sima Qian presents such a claim even more strongly. He says that he is writing the *Shiji* in a state of despair and compares such a situation to that faced by earlier sages when creating great works; among those situations mentioned is Confucius's creation (*zuo*) of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.⁸ He then presents the contents of his work, explaining why he wrote each section; the verb he uses to describe his acts of composition is *zuo*.⁹ Thus, while Sima Qian mimics Confucius's claim to be only transmitting, he elsewhere states that he is a creator, implying that he, like Confucius, is an unrecognized sage.

But, if Sima Qian is implicitly presenting himself as a sage, then what sort of work does he claim the *Shiji* to be? As we have seen, both Mencius and Dong Zhongshu were committed to the idea that an act of *zuo* by a true sage involved not the introduction of artifice but the distilling of proper patterns for humanity, and that Confucius's act of *zuo*-ing the *Spring and Autumn Annals* was accordingly an act of distilling moral patterns as a guide to future generations. And, as we have seen, Sima Qian quotes Dong Zhongshu on this very issue.

If, then, Sima Qian is implicitly comparing his work to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and if he is implicitly claiming to have *zuo*-ed a work, then is his composition intended to be similar to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and is his act of *zuo* intended to be comparable to the act of *zuo* attributed to Confucius by figures like Mencius and Dong Zhongshu? And, if so, is he claiming to have unmediated access to eternal patterns, and is he using such patterns to criticize Wudi?

I believe that although Sima Qian is indeed claiming to *zuo*, he does not intend his work to be modeled on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. To begin with, it would be difficult to argue that this work is intended to distill moral patterns from the historical process. While it is true that Sima Qian frequently closes his chapters with moral statements, it is not at all clear that he really believes them, and indeed the juxtaposition of such seemingly simplistic statements against his more nuanced narratives appears frequently to function as a critique of the statements.¹⁰

But, then, is Sima Qian arguing the opposite? Is his goal to undermine the claims of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, to deny that moral principles can be applied to the complexities of the historical process? I doubt this as well. After all, it would hardly take a 130-chapter work to make such a point.

I believe that Sima Qian is up to something very different, and ultimately much more complex.¹¹ On the meaning of *zuo*, Sima Qian seems to question the claim that a sage's act of *zuo* involves a pure distillation of inherent patterns in the world and to argue that there is an act of construction—even artificial construction—in any act of authorship. He is questioning the sorts of claims made in the Ruist tradition—and argued so influentially in the *Xici*—concerning the way that sages can replicate and distill patterns.

The clearest discussion of such issues appears in Sima Qian's famous "Biog-

raphy of Bo Yi." In this, he openly questions the reliability of the sages, particularly Confucius, who wrote the classics. He begins by pointing out men of "highest propriety" who are not even mentioned.¹² He then questions Confucius's interpretation of Bo Yi and Shu Qi. Although, claims Confucius, Bo Yi and Shu Qi felt no resentment, Sima Qian points out that a poem attributed to them does indeed reveal signs of resentment.¹³ Sima Qian next turns to the question of whether Heaven really rewards the good. He points out that both Bo Yi and Shu Qi were good men, and yet they starved to death. Similarly, Yan Hui, Confucius's best disciple, died young, while the murderer Robber Zhi lived to old age.¹⁴

Having thus questioned the reliability of the classics, the reliability of Confucius himself, and the reliability of Heaven as a force that rewards the good and punishes the bad, Sima Qian turns to the question of sagehood and authorship. He begins by quoting from the "Wenyan" commentary to the *Yi*: "Things of the same degree of brightness illuminate each other, things of the same category seek each other. Clouds follow dragons, winds follow tigers. A sage *zuos*, and the myriad things become manifest."¹⁵ The "Wenyan" statement, which closely parallels the claims made in the *Xici*, says that there is pattern inherent in the natural world that becomes manifest when a sage *zuos*. Here, as in the *Xici*, *zuo* is best translated as "arises." Sages, therefore, serve to make manifest to humanity the patterns of the natural world.

Having thus quoted from a passage presenting the view of sagely action that had become dominant by this period, Sima Qian immediately undercuts the claim:

Although Bo Yi and Shu Qi were worthy, they were picked up by Confucius and their names became all the more illustrious. Although Yan Hui studied diligently, he attached himself to the tail of a horse and his conduct became all the more known. The scholars in caves may give and take at the right time, but names of their kind are extinguished and never praised. How sad!¹⁶

There is, in other words, a degree of arbitrariness in all of this. It is not that a sage simply *zuos* and thereby makes manifest the patterns of the world; on the contrary, what is made manifest is simply that which the sage comes to know and celebrate. Bo Yi and Shu Qi became known simply because Confucius

happened to tell their story. Moreover, as Sima Qian made clear earlier in the chapter, Confucius's presentation of them was not even accurate.

Of particular interest here is the fact that Sima Qian does not call attention to these deficiencies in order to point out the need for a superior sage. On the contrary, he undermines the entire claim that sages simply *zuo* and thereby make manifest the patterns of the world. There is, Sima Qian claims, an inherent element of construction in the process: sages do not simply lift up the patterns of the world; they construct. Confucius did not distill the lives of Bo Yi and Shu Qi as they really were; instead, he constructed a reading of them that was, Sima Qian points out, incorrect.

Such claims become all the more powerful when we remember that, as discussed above, Sima Qian implicitly stakes a claim to sagehood and implicitly claims to be *zuo*-ing. If, as I have argued, Sima Qian is denying the claim, worked out so powerfully in the *Xici*, that sages, in *zuo*-ing, are simply making patterns manifest to the world of humanity, then Sima Qian is admitting that there is an inevitable degree of construction in his own project. Sima Qian is claiming to *zuo*, but he is also arguing that such acts involve arbitrariness and construction.

But if Sima Qian is denying the ability to simply articulate patterns, then what claims does he make in his work? And, more to the immediate point here, what does he say about empire? I believe that concerns similar to those seen in his views of authorship inform his presentation of the rise of empire. I will try to demonstrate that Sima Qian saw an inherent element of discontinuity in a process that others around him defined as continuous. More specifically, Sima Qian seems to provide a critique of Han Wudi's claim to have brought empire into the moral patterns defined by the classics. His reconstruction of the rise of empire thus becomes a meditation on notions of creation, the role of sages in human history, and the ways that historical change occurs. To demonstrate this, I trace the ways that Sima Qian presents the initial rise of the state and the subsequent emergence of empire. Sima Qian takes up a number of the themes played upon in the narratives of the initial emergence of the state and provides a powerful meditation on the issues of continuity and discontinuity.

Sima Qian's Presentation of the History of the Chinese State

The Rule of Huangdi

The *Shiji* opens with a description of the emergence of the state. Sima Qian emphasizes in his concluding remarks to this chapter on the early sages that he wrote the essay by collating all of the extant material and weeding out the more fantastic elements.¹⁷ Following this statement, many commentators have read the chapter as a rationalized, historicized version of earlier myths.¹⁸

I argue, in contrast, that this is not simply an attempt to give a rationalized, historical account of the past sages but a narrative written with specific purposes in mind. Here, as elsewhere, Sima Qian does not simply present the closest thing he can get to objective history: he crafts the story in order to pose various issues related to the historical process. In this case, he provides, for reasons that will have to be discovered, yet another version of the narratives that were discussed in Chapter 3 of this study. At each stage in the reading of the story, then, it is necessary to ask why Sima Qian chooses to narrate the story in the way that he does.

Sima Qian begins with the decline of the reign of Shennong: "At the time of Xianyuan [Huangdi], the era of Shennong was declining. The lords of the states were attacking each other and tyrannizing the hundred families, but Shennong was unable to subjugate them."¹⁹ As discussed earlier, Shennong was used in third-century B.C. narratives, such as the "Gengfa" and "Huace" chapters of the *Shangjunshu*, to refer to a period of peace before the emergence of disorder—in other words, before the introduction of violence that Huangdi appropriated in his creation of the state. Here, we do indeed see the emergence of disorder with the decline of Shennong, although, as in the chapters from the *Shangjunshu*, there is no attempt to explain that emergence: Chi You is not posed as introducing the violence, and there is no attempt to root violence in the natural world. As with the *Shangjunshu* chapters, the emergence is simply posed as a part of the changes of history.

The author next turns to the attempts to control such disorder: "Xianyuan thereupon practiced and put into use shields and spears so as to subjugate those who had not submitted. The lords of the states all came and gave their allegiance to the court."²⁰ Whereas Shennong was unable to launch success-

ful campaigns against the lords, Huangdi correctly employed weapons to force their submission. Unlike in the *Shangjunshu* chapters, where the distinction between Shennong and Huangdi is drawn between a peaceful ruler and a creator of the state, here it is between one who is unable to deal adequately with the emergence of disorder and one who is so able.

Also worthy of note here is that the point of successful subjugation is equated with gaining the allegiance of the lords of the states. The local lords, in other words, are clearly still in existence after Huangdi's victory. Sima Qian is not, then, providing a legalist narrative of the destruction of the lords through the creation of a centralized state.

It is only now, after disorder has already emerged, and after Huangdi has already begun using weapons, that Chi You appears in the narrative: "But Chi You was the most tyrannical, and no one was able to attack him."²¹ Chi You creates neither disorder nor weapons: both precede his appearance, and neither one is discussed in relation to the problem of creation. Sima Qian instead poses Chi You as one of the lords of the state—as the most oppressive of the lords and the most difficult opponent.

Before discussing the figure further, however, the author introduces another opponent, Yandi: "Yandi wanted to attack and usurp the power of the lords of the states. The lords of the states all flocked to Xianyuan."²² If Chi You was the most oppressive lord, Yandi is the opposite: instead of being a lord who refuses to submit to the central court, Yandi, in Sima Qian's narrative, attempts to usurp the powers of the lords.

It is only at this point that Sima Qian discusses the organizing activities of Huangdi, which so many authors would see as defining the work of the sage: "Xianyuan thereupon cultivated his virtue, took up arms, put in order the five vapors, planted the five seeds, pacified the myriad peoples, and measured the four quarters."²³

Now Huangdi is ready to destroy the rebels. He first disposes of Yandi: "He thereby fought with Yandi in the fields of Banquan. Only after three battles did he achieve his goal." Next Chi You rebels: "Chi You created disorder, and did not obey the commands of [Huang]di."²⁴ Chi You creates disorder here, although not, as in the "Lü xing," for the first time. The sense here is like that seen in the *Shiliujing*, namely that it is a specific act of rebellion.

Huangdi then defeats the rebel with the help of the lords of the states:

"Huangdi thereupon summoned and led the lords of the states to fight with Chi You in the fields of Zhuolu. He then captured and killed Chi You."²⁵

It is this destruction of Yandi and Chi You by Huangdi that finally leads the lords to recognize him as the Son of Heaven, the successor to Shennong. He thereupon continues to use force to maintain order: "The lords of the states then all recognized Xianyuan as the Son of Heaven. He succeeded Shennong. This was Huangdi. As for those under Heaven who would not accord, Huangdi would pursue them and subjugate them. Once they were pacified, he would depart."²⁶

The entire narrative thus revolves around the relationship between the ruler and the lords of the states. The narrative opens with Shennong being unable to control the lords, and it ends with Huangdi gaining the allegiance of the lords and thus being recognized by them as the new Son of Heaven. As presented here, the key to successful rule is that the sovereign must be able to control the lords without usurping their power.

To emphasize this point, Sima Qian uses the relationship between Huangdi and the rebels Yandi and Chi You. He portrays Yandi and Chi You as complementary figures, one insufficiently respectful of local power and the other insufficiently respectful of central power. If Huangdi must defeat Yandi in order to prevent a usurpation of the power of the lords, he must also defeat Chi You in order to prevent the disorder that characterized the end of the reign of Shennong. The significance of Yandi is that, when he threatens to usurp the power of the lords, it is Huangdi to whom the lords turn; the significance of Chi You is that, when he opposes the central court, Huangdi is able successfully to lead the lords of the states against him. Only after thus showing that he can lead the lords while still respecting their position is Huangdi recognized by the lords as their next sovereign. Far from being, as in the *Shangjunshu*, a creator of the centralized state, Huangdi is a supporter of feudal institutions in which the local power of the lords is balanced with the central power of the monarch.

Huangdi, moreover, is an organizer, not a creator, and his opponents are employed in the narrative not as figures to whom creations can be ascribed but as representations of the opposing poles that Huangdi had to balance in order to organize the correct use of force by the state. None of the figures involved, including Huangdi and Chi You, are creators; Huangdi does not create

anything new or appropriate anything created by Chi You. Even when Sima Qian mentions weapons, one of the issues that figured so prominently in the Huangdi-Chi You narratives concerning the creation of organized violence, he does not at any point confront the issue of their origin. On the contrary, all that interests him is showing that Huangdi was able to use weapons effectively to control the lords. This is an issue of the correct use of violence, but not one of creation. Although the historian poses Huangdi as instituting order after the emergence of chaos at the end of the reign of Shennong, it is not clear that Huangdi's successful implementation of order involved anything other than what Shennong ought to have been able to do: nothing new is introduced by either Huangdi or his rebels.

This point is of interest because many of the authors who used an organizational model in their narratives of the emergence of the state did so out of an ideological opposition to the notion that the state instituted by the sages involved any elements that were created. I do not believe, however, that Sima Qian's goal here is to engage in an ideological debate about the initial emergence of the state, or, to be more precise, to do so only to the extent that it helps him to deal with the issues that really interest him. His main concern is to present a definition of the state that will allow him to measure later historical developments, including the introduction of empire. And it is in those sections dealing with the introduction of empire that Sima Qian turns to the problem of creation: if the feudal structure organized by Huangdi marks the basic form of the state, then the introduction of empire—the introduction, in other words, of a centralized rule that ends the traditional balance between local and central power—will mark a radical discontinuity. This first section of the *Shiji* is thus the opening move in a complex reweaving of the themes discussed at length in Chapter 3, a reweaving that occupies much of the remainder of this discussion.

The Rise of the Qin

An overview of the rise of the Qin and the historical importance of the Qin empire is given in the introductory remarks to chapter 15. Sima Qian's emphasis here is on the barbarian, transgressive qualities of the Qin people and state.

The author opens by referring to the formal beginning of the state of Qin, when the Zhou king enfeoffed Duke Xiang as a lord. Although the state thus

began according to a proper feudal procedure, Duke Xiang immediately transgressed the traditional relationship between lord and monarch:

When Duke Xiang of Qin was enfeoffed as a lord, he made a western altar for use in sacrificing to the god on high. The beginning of the Qin's usurpation is clear to see. The *Liji* says: "The Son of Heaven makes offerings to Heaven and Earth, while the lords of the states make offerings to the famous mountains and great rivers within their domains."²⁷

The state thus began with a usurpation: the duke, immediately upon being enfeoffed as a lord of the state, usurped the royal privilege of sacrificing to the god on high.

Moreover, Sima Qian argues in the next sentence, the customs of the Qin were mixed with the Rong and Yi barbarians and thus stood apart from the morality that defined the Zhou: "Now, the customs of the Qin were mixed with those of the Rong and Yi. The [rulers] put cruelty and violence first and humaneness and propriety second."²⁸ Overall, the Qin rulers were barbaric usurpers, strangers to the practices and morality of the central states.

Nonetheless, by the time the Qin came to prominence in the Warring States period, all of the states had broken from their proper feudal relationship with the Zhou kings. Indeed, Sima Qian states explicitly that the Warring States period itself began in usurpation, when three ministers divided the state of Jin, and when the minister Tian He killed the rulers of Qi and took over the state: "The three states in the end divided up Jin, and Tian He destroyed the Qi rulers and took possession of the state. The flourishing of the six states began from this. All effort resided in strengthening arms and annexing enemies."²⁹ The period of the Warring States is thus characterized by a usurpation of the power of the lords enfeoffed by the earlier Zhou kings.

In this context, the historian argues, the Qin's acts were a great accomplishment: the state did indeed bring to an end the disorder into which the realm had fallen: "When the Qin captured all under Heaven, it involved much violence. But the times had changed, and their accomplishments were great."³⁰ Contrary to the opinion of other scholars, Sima Qian claims, the fact that the Qin empire was so short-lived does not negate its historical importance:

Scholars, following what they have heard, see that the Qin occupied the imperial position for only a short time. But they do not investigate the consequences or beginnings of the situation, and accordingly they mention the Qin only to laugh at it, not daring to speak about them. This is no different from using one's ear to eat. How pitiful!³¹

The Qin were indeed barbaric usurpers, and the empire held by the Qin was indeed extremely short, but nonetheless the state successfully brought to an end a period of time that was itself defined by usurpation.

Sima Qian is thus arguing that the Qin empire served a valuable historical function. But his method of argument is intriguing. He does not attempt to morally resurrect the Qin or claim that the Qin played a valuable role despite their immorality. On the contrary, he emphasizes that the Qin were usurpers who violently destroyed the feudal institutions of the past. Nonetheless, he claims, the times had changed such that all of the states had degenerated to an intolerable level; in this context, the actions of the Qin were historically laudatory. Sima Qian hints here at some points that will become of paramount importance in his broader discussion: first, that times do change, such that in certain contexts ruthless actions become understandable, and second, that the Qin were crucial in ending the disorder of the Warring States—not in spite of but because of their barbaric qualities.

At first glance, this argument would appear to be similar to that in the *Shangjunshu*: times change and, in the chaos of the Warring States, only a centralized state structure based upon a strict legal system could bring order. But our reading of Sima Qian's treatment of Huangdi in the first section of this chapter has already suggested that the historian is far removed from the concerns of those who favored centralized rule: if he sympathized with such concerns, why, instead of following the *Shangjunshu* in presenting a narrative of the creation of a centralized state, did he pose the basic form of the state as feudalistic? Indeed, Sima Qian is highly critical of strong centralized institutions, and he is also critical of those who, like the authors of the *Shangjunshu*, are overly willing to ignore precedent. Nonetheless, he is also not a Mencian idealist longing for a return to the traditional, feudal institutions of the past. Sima Qian's guarded praise for the Qin is instead part of a complex presentation of how empire came to be introduced and later consolidated in Chinese history, and his own view

of empire is intimately wrapped up in this larger historical understanding. In order to explore his argument, I turn to Sima Qian's presentation of the first emperor.

The First Emperor

When King Zheng of Qin in 221 B.C. unified the states and created the first empire in Chinese history, he entitled himself "first emperor" and is purported to have proclaimed that his descendants would rule the empire for ten thousand generations. Opposing the practice of enfeoffment, he instituted a unified system of prefectures and commanderies, which he hoped would place all control under the central state. The first emperor's own inscriptions emphasized his reign as one of tremendous innovation.

This theme of radical innovation dominates Sima Qian's presentation of the first emperor as well. The historian paints the first emperor as a dictatorial extremist who purposely destroyed the practices of the ancient sages and attempted to create an entirely new order. Sima Qian further presents the first emperor in much the same terms that he uses to describe the state of Qin in general: the founder of the first empire in Chinese history was a usurper who stood fully outside the moral concerns that should normatively define a ruler.

The theme of innovation is played particularly strongly by Sima Qian through the use of dialogue and speeches. For example, in Sima Qian's narration of the debates over whether the Qin ruler, upon unifying the states, should assume the old title of "king" or create a new title, he presents the ministers as stating the following:

In ancient times, the land of the five *di*³² was a thousand *li* square. Beyond this were lords and barbarians who had submitted. Of the lords of the states, some came to court and some did not; the Son of Heaven was unable to control them. Now you have raised righteous weapons and punished the robbers and thieves. You have pacified and settled all under Heaven, and you have made [*wei*] all of the land within the seas into commanderies and prefectures. Laws and ordinances come from one authority. Since the earliest times there has never been such a thing. This is something that the five *di* were unable to attain.³³

In other words, the ruler has started an entirely new era, beyond anything accomplished by the five *di*.

Sima Qian next turns to the debate as to whether the emperor should, like the dynasties before him, enfeoff land to various lords. His minister Li Si is described as arguing that the practice of enfeoffment led ultimately to the breakdown of the Zhou: as the lords became increasingly independent of the central court, the Zhou eventually lost power. Accordingly, he argued, no enfeoffment should occur.³⁴ The first emperor agreed and thus created the system of centrally controlled commanderies into which he divided the land.³⁵ By narrating the policy choice in this way, Sima Qian again emphasizes that such a form of centralization was a radical break from anything that had preceded, and that the first emperor had fully rejected the traditional relationship between the central court and the lords of the states.

This point is underlined by Sima Qian's own presentation of history. In his first chapter, Sima Qian not only described Huangdi's control over the lords of the states as limited, but went so far as to claim that it was the lords of the states who granted Huangdi his throne. In contrast, the Qin ruler has destroyed the practice of enfeoffment entirely and has created an imperial realm divided into commanderies. Through his creation of empire, the first emperor has, then, destroyed the balance that defined the rule of Huangdi.

Sima Qian emphasizes the hubris of such a willful dismissal of precedent by providing a series of critiques purportedly given by ministers and scholars. These figures criticize the first emperor for a lack of morality, a failure to imitate the past, and other deficiencies, and argue that his empire is doomed unless he follows the ways of the ancient sages. In one such example, Sima Qian quotes a scholar, Chunyu Yue, who remonstrates to the emperor as follows: "I have heard that the kings of the Yin and Zhou ruled for over a thousand years by enfeoffing their sons, younger brothers, and accomplished ministers. . . . I have never heard of one whose undertakings did not imitate antiquity [*shi gu*] and yet was able to endure for a long time."³⁶ The first emperor then asks his ministers to discuss the criticism. Li Si is quoted as saying to the first emperor:

You have fashioned [*chuang*] a great undertaking and established a merit that will last for ten thousand generations. . . . Now all under Heaven has been settled and the laws and ordinances emerge from a single source. . . . But the scholars, instead of according with the present, study the past so as to negate the present age and to delude and bring disorder to the masses.³⁷

He goes on to ask that the emperor burn all but an excepted set of books and execute all those who use the past to negate the present.³⁸ The first emperor approved. Not only, then, does the first emperor fail to listen to Chunyu Yue's admonitions to follow the past, but he burns most of the books dealing with the past and pledges to execute anyone who would dare give comparable admonitions in the future.

Thus, instead of simply providing a narrative about the burning of the books by the first emperor, Sima Qian presents the act as coming immediately after, and indeed in direct response to, a statement of admonition to imitate the past. He thus emphasizes the hubris of the first emperor, and Chunyu Yue's warning that the Qin empire will not be able to endure without a connection to the past becomes a strong foreshadowing of the ultimate failure of the first emperor's rule.

Sima Qian further emphasizes the hubris of the first emperor through numerous anecdotes. Although there is no basis on which to judge the historical veracity of these stories,³⁹ they are very telling of the viewpoint of the author. In the following narrative, for example, the first emperor is presented as attacking a spirit for causing troublesome winds:

Floating down the Yangzi River, he arrived at the shrine of Mt. Xiang. He encountered a strong wind and was almost unable to cross. He asked the scholars, "Which spirit is the ruler of Xiang?" The scholars responded: "We have heard that she was the daughter of Yao and the wife of Shun, and that she is buried here." The first emperor was thereupon very angry and sent three thousand convicts to cut down the trees on Mt. Xiang. The mountain was left bare.⁴⁰

Instead of submitting himself to divine powers, the first emperor is presented here as punishing the spirit of Mt. Xiang, a spirit intimately associated with the sages of the past, for not offering full submission to him. Once again, Sima Qian paints the first emperor as lacking any regard for either the past or the divine.

True to the statements of the moralizers quoted throughout the chapter, the empire was destroyed soon after the death of the first emperor. Far from creating an empire that would last for ten thousand generations, the dynasty lasted only fourteen years.

Sima Qian makes the following statement in summary: "The first emperor believed that his own achievements exceeded those of the five *di*, his territory was larger than that of the three kings, and he felt ashamed to be seen as similar to them."⁴¹ Considering the first emperor's rapid demise, Sima Qian's comments here underline the foolhardiness of such claims.

Overall, Sima Qian's presentation of the first emperor is not flattering. The ruler is consistently portrayed as arrogant in the extreme and as obsessed with exceeding the achievements of the past sages. His actions are described with the terms of creation that had become so problematic in early Chinese writings: *chuang*, *wei*, and (in the first emperor's inscriptions quoted in Chapter 4 of this study), *zuo*. Moreover, Chunyu Yue's purported statement, quoted above, has been presented as prophetic: by failing to imitate the past, the first emperor doomed his empire to a short life. Sima Qian's narrative would thus appear to be a simple diatribe against innovation; the moral, then, would be that radical innovation is bad and that one should follow the sages of the past.

Such a negative portrait of the first emperor to some degree supports the statements quoted in the previous section, wherein Sima Qian treated the Qin as barbaric usurpers, opposed to the proper order of the past. In those statements, however, he also praised the Qin, however guardedly, arguing that their violent actions did successfully end the disorder of the Warring States. Thus, while the introduction of empire is here strongly criticized from a moral point of view, the author elsewhere recognizes the accomplishments of the Qin imperial system.⁴²

These two somewhat different treatments of the Qin would seem to imply that, in Sima Qian's view, there is a conflict between necessity and morality: the first emperor may be morally deplorable, but his actions were, unfortunately, necessary for the time. I believe, however, that the problem posed by Sima Qian here is concerned more directly with the manner in which empire was introduced into history, an issue that Sima Qian believes relevant to understanding certain aspects of his culture.⁴³ To follow this, I next analyze his discussion of the Qin-Han interregnum and the beginning of the Han dynasty, both of which narrate the historical processes by which the innovations of this transgressive and amoral creator were taken over and brought into a more successful order.

*The Destruction of the Qin and the Founding of the Han:
The War Between Liu Bang and Xiang Yu*

XIANG YU

The next chapter in the text is devoted to Xiang Yu, the great rebel who succeeded in destroying the Qin empire. Sima Qian presents the figure as a purely warlike, arrogant tyrant and frequently pairs him with Liu Bang, another rebel who eventually defeated Xiang Yu and started the Han dynasty.⁴⁴ Much of the contrast between these two figures is defined by their relationship to the imperial system created by the first emperor, and in particular by the differing stands they took on whether to return to the traditional relationship between central and local power.

At the beginning of their rebellion, Xiang Yu and his uncle Xiang Liang gained support by placing the descendants of the rulers of the pre-imperial states back on their thrones. Xiang Liang and Xiang Yu claimed to be simply working at the behest of the grandson of the late ruler of Chu.⁴⁵ The revolt was thus originally posed as a revolt of the traditional, local rulers (some of whom could claim that their ancestors were originally enfeoffed by the Zhou) against the imperial rule of the first emperor. The apparent claim, then, was that the first emperor had no right to proclaim a new dynasty at all, and Xiang Yu was thus leading the rightful heirs of the states against the Qin tyranny.

Later, after the rebellion succeeded, Xiang Yu's claims shifted. Instead of supporting the descendants of the pre-Qin rulers, he had the ruler of Chu killed.⁴⁶ At this point it became clear that he was instituting a tyranny. Following this, a number of local rulers began rebelling against what they perceived to be a growing usurpation of their power. One of the most important among these new rebels was Liu Bang, the King of Han.⁴⁷

The final victory of Liu Bang over Xiang Yu is posed by Sima Qian as due to the stronger support by and superior utilization of the lords of the states by the former. According to Sima Qian, Liu Bang decided to attack Xiang Yu when his ministers pointed out that the lords were on the side of Liu Bang.⁴⁸ The turning point in the battle occurred when Liu Bang promised to enfeoff Han Xin and Peng Yue with land and thereby convinced them to join him with their troops.⁴⁹ Sima Qian thus presents the success of Liu Bang as the victory of a supporter of local power over a tyrant who wished to usurp that power.

Sima Qian then closes the chapter with a narrative about the final period of

Xiang Yu's life. He quotes a poem purportedly sung by the hero once he came to realize the inevitability of his defeat:

My strength [*li*] has uprooted mountains,
My vitality has dominated the era.
But the times were not propitious.⁵⁰

On his own ability, Xiang Yu claimed, he dominated the world; his failure only occurred because the times were not favorable.

Sima Qian also quotes Xiang Yu's closing soliloquy:

From the time of my raising an army until now has been eight years. I have personally been in 70 or more battles. Those I faced were destroyed, those I attacked submitted. I have never been defeated or turned back. As a hegemon, I possessed all under Heaven. But now, in the end, I am hemmed in. This is Heaven's destroying me; it is not my faults in battle.⁵¹

Once again, Xiang Yu emphasizes his own greatness and blames his final defeat on an outside source, this time the arbitrary power of Heaven.

Sima Qian begins his moral assessment by arguing that Xiang Yu's claims to greatness in battle are absolutely true. Indeed, he states that Xiang Yu's accomplishments were equal to if not superior to those of the ancient sages:

The grand historian says: "I have heard Zhou Sheng state, 'Shun's eyes in fact had double pupils.' I have also heard that Xiang Yu had double pupils. Could it be that Xiang Yu was Shun's progeny? How sudden was his rise! When the Qin lost its rule and Chen She started the revolt, heroes rose up like wasps, struggling with each other, so many that they could not be counted. But Xiang Yu, without even a foot or an inch of territory, seized the right moment and arose from the countryside. Within three years, commanding five lords, he destroyed the Qin. He divided the empire and enfeoffed the kings and lords. The rule emanated from Xiang Yu; he was referred to as the hegemon-king. Although this position was not held until the end, from ancient times until now there has never been such a thing."⁵²

These are strong words of praise. Sima Qian compares Xiang Yu to the great sage Shun himself and describes him as being, quite possibly, a descendant of

the sage. The importance of this description becomes clear in the next few lines, wherein the figure is praised for destroying the Qin empire and reinstating the traditional practice of enfeoffment: as a figure possibly linked lineally to one of the ancient sages, Xiang Yu's rebellion represented an attempt to destroy the innovations of the first emperor and to return to the ways of the past.

Thus far, Sima Qian praises Xiang Yu strongly for his connection to the past, both in the sense of his return to the ways of the ancient sages and in the claim that he may be connected by descent to Shun. Even the statement that the speed of Xiang Yu's rise surpassed that of the sages is not an imputation of innovation. Sima Qian simply argues this to underline the hero's greatness: Xiang Yu was so amazing, Sima Qian is saying, that he rose to prominence even faster than the sages of the past.

But, the author continues, Xiang Yu did deserve his fate. The point of failure is that, ultimately, he too rejected the ways of the past. After the fall of the Qin, Xiang Yu turned against his own reconstitution of the traditional feudal relationships that, Sima Qian has argued, defined the sagely rule of the past: "But when it came to Xiang Yu turning his back on the Pass [the capital] and returning to Chu, banishing the righteous emperor and establishing himself, is it difficult to understand why the resentful kings and lords revolted?"⁵³ Not content to abide by the traditional relationships, he left the capital and returned to his native land, and then killed his own ruler. His failure is revealed by the fact that the enfeoffed kings and lords revolted against him.

Sima Qian then turns to an explanation of what aspects of Xiang Yu's character led to this ultimate failure:

He boasted of his own achievements and merits. He was determined in his own knowledge [*zhi*] and did not imitate the ancients [*shi gu*]. He described his undertaking as one of a hegemon-king, wishing to use his strength to subjugate and manage all under Heaven. Within five years he was dead and his state was destroyed.⁵⁴

Sima Qian characterizes Xiang Yu as having the attribute of knowledge (*zhi*). Moreover, he is singled out for having failed to imitate the ancients (*shi gu*)—the same criticism leveled by Chunyu Yue against the first emperor. The significance of this statement is revealed when we recall the discussion in Chapter 3 concerning the debates of the third and second centuries B.C., wherein

knowledge (*zhi*) was consistently posed as a problematic term, associated with creation and opposed to such notions as according and following the past.

Sima Qian implies that the only way for a figure to start a new dynasty after the fall of the Qin would be to reconnect with the past that the Qin empire had attempted to destroy. Although Xiang Yu at first began to do just that with his reinstatement of the practice of enfeoffment, he ultimately, not unlike the first emperor, attempted to wipe out the local rulers and institute a tyranny. He was therefore, Sima Qian claims, very much deserving of his fate: "He claimed that 'Heaven destroyed me; it was not a fault in my use of arms.' Was this not deluded?"⁵⁵ Like the first emperor, Xiang Yu turned his back on the morality and practices of the past sages and was thus unable to start a new dynasty.⁵⁶

Liu Bang

Sima Qian's ensuing discussion of the founder of the Han dynasty is given largely in counterpoint to his presentation of Xiang Yu. Liu Bang won support by granting land to loyal followers, and unlike Xiang Yu, Liu Bang respected the local rulers and made no attempt to institute a tyranny. This point is emphasized in several places in Sima Qian's chapter on Liu Bang as well.⁵⁷

In one scene, Sima Qian narrates a dialogue between Liu Bang and his lords and generals concerning the reasons for his victory. One of the reasons given is that, unlike Xiang Yu, who attempted to hoard all power for himself, Liu Bang was willing to share his rule and reward those who helped him in battle.⁵⁸ Like Huangdi, Liu Bang succeeded because he was able to lead local rulers without usurping their privileges.

Liu Bang's respect for the local rulers is also made clear in Sima Qian's narration of the rebel's acceptance of the imperial title. After his victory over Xiang Yu, Liu Bang was purportedly asked to take the title by the enfeoffed lords and kings themselves. When Liu Bang declined, his followers are quoted as saying to him: "As for those who have merit, you have parceled out the land and enfeoffed them as lords and kings. If the great king does not accept the title, everyone will doubt and refuse to believe [the titles]."⁵⁹ Finally, Liu Bang accepted the title of emperor with the following words: "If all of the rulers take this as beneficial, then it must be beneficial to the states and families."⁶⁰

Sima Qian thus presents Liu Bang as at least in part reinstating the traditional relationship between ruler and lords. Like Huangdi, Liu Bang supported

the local power of the lords against those who had attempted to usurp their power, in this case the first emperor and Xiang Yu. And again like Huangdi, Liu Bang accepted the imperial title only at the behest of the local rulers. Indeed, Sima Qian poses the local rulers as claiming that Liu Bang's acceptance of the role will allow them to preserve their power.

The contrast with the first emperor and Xiang Yu is clear. The first emperor took power at the expense of the lords and kings and indeed defined the empire by his refusal to enfeoff land, and Xiang Yu attempted to usurp local power and institute a tyranny. Liu Bang, in contrast, returned in part to the traditional relationship between central and local power, and this return is presented by Sima Qian as a causative factor in his success.⁶¹

But the nature of this return is intriguing. Although he presented himself as following the traditional relationships of the feudal past, Liu Bang accepted the imperial title inherited from the first emperor. Moreover, he enfeoffed only about two-thirds of the land of the empire; the rest was organized into commanderies along the lines of the Qin empire.

Sima Qian subtly exploits the potential tension between these two facts. On the one hand, Sima Qian has made it clear in his critiques of the first emperor and Xiang Yu that historical longevity can be achieved only by those who follow the past. Moreover, he has attributed the success of Gaozu to his return (albeit partial) to the practice of enfeoffment.⁶² On the other hand, Sima Qian is at pains to point out in the remainder of the chapter that, by granting so much power to others through enfeoffment, Gaozu was also endangering the very empire that he had just instituted. If this was his method of success, in other words, it also planted the seeds for his destruction.

Sima Qian develops this notion by devoting a significant part of the remainder of the chapter to detailing one revolt after another by the local rulers. Gaozu's response to these revolts was to replace the rulers with members of his own family—figures, in other words, who would tend to be more loyal to him.⁶³ As it was for the Zhou, however, this is only a temporary solution: the passing of generations inevitably generates distance between the ruling line and the descendants of the enfeoffed rulers, and the problem then develops again.

Although Sima Qian thus presents Gaozu as succeeding in part because of his willingness to avoid the harsh aspects of Qin centralization, his narrative also makes it clear that this avoidance made Gaozu's empire highly unstable. If

Xiang Yu ultimately failed by refusing to grant any true power to local rulers, Gaozu failed on the other side. He won their allegiance and was thus able to start a new dynasty at their behest, but his failure to control them endangered the empire. Indeed, Gaozu himself died from a wound received fighting against Qing Bu, the king of Huainan who had revolted against the emperor.⁶⁴

Sima Qian's narrative thus presents the rise of empire as a seemingly unresolvable tension. On the one hand, he has emphasized that the basic form of the state, as seen in the reign of Huangdi, involved infeudation, and he has made it clear that only by imitating that state can one successfully maintain a lasting dynasty. This is why both the first emperor and Xiang Yu failed and why Gaozu succeeded. On the other hand, he has argued that, owing to the changes of history (beginning with the Warring States), the feudal state is no longer adequate to maintain order. Any departure from that form of the state is doomed to failure, but simply maintaining it is equally doomed in the attempt to maintain order. The resolution of this tension during the reigns of the next few emperors of the Han dynasty constitutes one of the themes of Sima Qian's study. In particular, the author is interested in presenting the eventual resurgence of the Qin system under the Han.

Chao Cuo

The dangerous potential in the policy of enfeoffment continued to develop during the next few reigns, finally forcing Emperors Jing and Wu to centralize power once again. Sima Qian's view of this development can be seen in some of his discussions of the ministers of the time. The most important of these for our purposes are his writings on Chao Cuo, a figure who held positions during the reigns of Emperors Wen and Jing.

In his chapter on Chao Cuo, Sima Qian begins by describing the minister as harsh, frank, and ruthless, and states that he studied the doctrines of the Lord of Shang and Shen Buhai.⁶⁵ Early in his career, Chao Cuo sent over ten memorials to Wendi, advising him to cut back the power of the lords of the states and to change the laws. Wendi, however, did not follow the advice.⁶⁶

When Jingdi came to power, Chao Cuo, still recognizing the dangerous potential of the enfeoffed rulers, again recommended that the emperor cut back the land of the lords and, furthermore, take over the outlying provinces.⁶⁷ This time, his advice was followed. Not surprisingly, the lords of the states strongly

opposed Chao Cuo's changes. The ruler of Wu, along with those of six other states, then revolted, demanding that Chao Cuo be executed. Yuan Ang and Dou Ying, both of whom had long opposed Chao Cuo,⁶⁸ recommended that the emperor do so. In order to appease the local rulers, Jingdi ordered Chao Cuo cut in half.⁶⁹

After the execution, the emperor sent Duke Deng to attack Wu and Chu. When the duke returned, he chastised the emperor, saying that Chao Cuo, afraid that the lords of the states could not be controlled, had tried to diminish their land simply in order to save the empire. The emperor fell silent and then said that he regretted the decision to execute his minister.⁷⁰ The moment is made all the more powerful by the fact that Jingdi, as well as his successor, Wu, went on to implement the general thrust of Chao Cuo's policies by dramatically increasing the power of the central court at the expense of the local areas.

By executing Chao Cuo, Jingdi held fast to the traditions of enfeoffment and thus prevented the re-employment of the policies introduced by the Qin. The emperor's purported regret, so strongly emphasized by Sima Qian, underscores the fact that Chao Cuo's policies were indeed necessary. Chao Cuo, he says, provided an accurate assessment of the problem concerning central and local power, and his views were necessary, though ruthless.

This relatively favorable reading of Chao Cuo appears elsewhere in the *Shiji* as well. For example, in his chapter on Liu Pi, the king of Wu who revolted against the court, Sima Qian again says Chao Cuo was correct to favor curtailing the power of the enfeoffed rulers. The relevant section of the chapter begins with a description of the relationship between Chao Cuo and Wendi, the ruler who refused to heed Chao Cuo's advice:

When Chao Cuo became the steward of the heir apparent and won the latter's favor, he on numerous occasions said that, because of the transgressions of Wu, the territory of the state should be reduced. He sent several statements to the Filial Wendi, but Wendi declined, not wishing to use punishments. Because of this, the state of Wu daily grew more powerful.⁷¹

Sima Qian makes it clear here that Wendi's refusal to follow Chao Cuo's advice and punish the ruler of Wu allowed the latter to achieve the power that he did. Wendi's inaction only made the situation worse.

When Jingdi then came to power, Chao Cuo's argument to him is narrated by Sima Qian as follows:

In earlier times, when Emperor Gaozu first brought stability to all under Heaven, his brothers were few and his sons young. He thus enfeoffed large amounts of land to his family members. . . . Now the king of Wu . . . is growing increasingly arrogant and excessive. He is casting money from the [the materials] in the mountains, boiling water from the sea to make salt,⁷² inviting fugitives from all under Heaven, and planning to create disorder. Now, if you reduce his land, he will revolt, and if you do not reduce his land he will also revolt. But if you reduce his land, his revolt will be undertaken soon, and the scale will be smaller. If you do not reduce his land, the revolt will come later, and it will be a major calamity.⁷³

Chao Cuo is shown to be perfectly aware that his actions will spark a revolt. Nonetheless, considering the dangerous point to which the situation had been allowed to develop, he feels it far better to act immediately before Wu gains any more power. At least this way, he is saying, the scale of the revolt will be manageable.

The narrative here, like that in the chapter on Chao Cuo himself, clearly presents the minister as correct: he evaluated the situation well, and the only significant blame provided in the chapter is placed on Wendi for failing to follow the minister's advice. Even the fact that Chao Cuo's actions helped to spark the revolt is presented as simply an inevitable result of a policy oriented toward curbing local power.

The view of Chao Cuo that underlies both of these discussions is of a pre-scient minister whose policies were thwarted by the poor judgment of his rulers. Wendi failed to listen to Chao Cuo, and Jingdi lost his will to maintain Chao Cuo's policies and instead had the minister executed. If, however, Sima Qian presents Chao Cuo in a favorable light in his narratives, his concluding summaries are sharply critical. Instead of posing the minister as having been unfairly executed, Sima Qian's evaluations criticize Chao Cuo strongly and argue that, insofar as he failed to accord with the past, he deserved his destruction.

In his remarks at the end of the chapter on Chao Cuo, for example, Sima Qian begins: "Many were the things that he altered and changed. The lords of

the states then rose up in revolt.”⁷⁴ Immediately, Sima Qian places Chao Cuo in the same light as the first emperor and Xiang Yu: Chao Cuo was in favor of change. His rejection of the past then led to a revolt by the lords against a usurpation of their traditional privileges.

At the end of his closing remarks, Sima Qian returns to this point, utilizing, as he often does in his final statements, a traditional saying about the necessity of following the past: “There is a saying: ‘As for changing the old and bringing chaos to the constant, if it does not bring death it will certainly bring destruction.’ This clearly refers to people like Chao Cuo!”⁷⁵ The main problem with Chao Cuo is that he attempted to change the old and the constant. By doing so, he brought destruction on himself.

Sima Qian makes a similar point in the concluding remarks to his chapter on Liu Pi, again turning to a traditional saying about the dangers of innovation: “‘Do not be an initiator in issues of power, or it will be turned around and you will receive its inauspiciousness.’ Does this not apply to Yuan Ang and Chao Cuo?”⁷⁶ Just as the traditional saying suggested would happen, Chao Cuo, as an initiator, was destroyed, as was Yuan Ang, another minister of Jingdi. Once again, Sima Qian reads the ultimate fate of individuals through a moral framework: those who depart from the ways of the past are doomed to failure. The act of initiating something is inherently inauspicious, and the initiator will therefore be destroyed. Chao Cuo, like both the first emperor and Xiang Yu, failed to imitate the past, and his fate, like theirs, was very much deserved.

There is a fascinating ambivalence here between, on the one hand, a relatively sympathetic narration of the figure and, on the other, a highly critical summary based upon the criterion of according with the past. If Chao Cuo’s attempt to increase central power at the expense of the local rulers is presented as necessary in the narrative portions of the work, it is posed as immoral, and doomed to failure, in the concluding portions.

The ambivalence is compounded when we note one of the statements made in another of Sima Qian’s concluding summaries, this time to his chapter on Jingdi:

The grand historian says: “When the Han arose, the Filial Wen spread great virtue, and all under Heaven embraced peace. When it came to the time of Jingdi, there was no longer any anxiety concerning the different families [in control of local areas]. But Chao Cuo cut away at

the lords of the states, finally making seven states rise up, join together, and turn their sights westward [toward the central court].”⁷⁷

It will be recalled that, in one of the chapters just discussed, Sima Qian presented the refusal by Wendi to follow the advice of Chao Cuo as a mistake that allowed the power of the state of Wu to grow to dangerous proportions. Here, in contrast, the emphasis is not on the failure of Wendi to follow Chao Cuo’s suggestions but on the greatness of Wendi for achieving peace through virtue, instead of centralizing policies. The rebellion by the local kings is then posed as the fault of Chao Cuo, and the blame in particular is focused on the ruthlessness of his policies. The moral here is that the way to peace is through a rule of virtue, while centralizing policies lead to destruction. Chao Cuo, then, is simply a negative example of the kind of behavior the state should reject.

The question then arises as to what exactly Sima Qian’s view of Chao Cuo is. Was he a laudable and unfairly executed adviser who correctly recognized the need for change, or was he a ruthless minister who, by failing to respect traditional practice, deserved to be executed?

I think that Sima Qian’s point is that both statements are true: Chao Cuo was a ruthless supporter of centralizing policies who departed from tradition and deserved his fate, but he was also the initiator of a policy in the Han dynasty that ultimately saved the empire. This is the same kind of ambivalence seen earlier in Sima Qian’s treatment of the first emperor. The figures deserved to be destroyed for failing to accord with the past, but historically speaking, the institutions that the first emperor created and that Chao Cuo attempted to reintroduce for the Han were necessary for the times: just as the first emperor brought an end to the Warring States period through his creation of the first unified empire, so does Chao Cuo initiate for the Han the institutions that will ultimately destroy local power and hence bring stability to an otherwise weak and probably doomed empire.⁷⁸

The author’s point, then, is not that Chao Cuo ought to have continued in his role, any more than the empire of the first emperor deserved to achieve longevity. Instead, his point is that what they introduced had to be introduced, even if the act was ruthless and deserved moral censure.

And here Sima Qian’s view of history begins to become clear. Following, albeit reluctantly, texts like the *Shangjunshu*, Sima Qian recognizes that times change, and that, since the total breakdown of order in the Warring States,

the introduction of imperial institutions had, unfortunately, become necessary. Nonetheless, Sima Qian also reads history through the lens of a moral framework in which those who follow the ancient sages prosper and those who do not are destroyed. Sima Qian has thus laid out a complex problem, wherein the continuation of the traditional practice of enfeoffment is treated as dangerous, and yet any deviation from this tradition is doomed. Sima Qian's purpose in setting up this tension and his means of resolving it become clear in his presentation of Wudi.

Wudi

Wudi finally ended much of the power of the rulers of the various states and reimplemented a legal system and complex prefectural system reminiscent of that seen in the Qin empire. In other words, Wudi successfully put into practice the imperial system created by the first emperor and initiated for the Han by Chao Cuo. Sima Qian's view of this seemingly successful implementation has been much discussed, and the dominant scholarly view has been that Sima Qian was opposed to the policies of his ruler.⁷⁹

The reasons for the scholarly consensus are not hard to find. Although Sima Qian could not, for obvious reasons, attack his ruling emperor directly, his implicit critiques of the ruler are pervasive in the *Shiji* and are frequently only thinly veiled. For example, in the "Pingjun shu," chapter 30, Sima Qian discusses Han economic policy. After a brief discussion of the policies of the first Han rulers, the historian details those of Wudi, focusing in particular on his attempts to conduct expansionist wars and build state monopolies. In his concluding remarks, he provides a lengthy diatribe against the first emperor for impoverishing the people through the same policies.⁸⁰ As many commentators have noted,⁸¹ the diatribe is clearly aimed at Wudi.

The method of criticism, however, is intriguing: Sima Qian attacks his ruler by drawing implicit parallels with the first emperor. It is possible that the historian's only reason for doing so is that drawing such a parallel would be a very potent form of critique. But the fact that Sima Qian uses the same method elsewhere should perhaps lead us to suspect that he is providing a more complex critique than simply pointing to the lack of virtue of Wudi.

He uses such parallels in another chapter, as well, the "Fengshan shu." The work is devoted to the history of the *feng* and *shan*, two sacrifices discussed in

Chapter 4 of this study. The “Fengshan shu” has achieved some degree of notoriety for its portrayal of Wudi in an extremely negative light throughout the narrative. Indeed, much of the chapter recounts how the emperor fell under the influence of one magician after another, and the historian makes it clear that many of the magicians were obviously fraudulent. Because of this, it might at first be assumed that the historian’s point in the chapter is to criticize the superstitiousness of Wudi, and that parallels with the first emperor are again drawn in order to underline the lack of virtue of the emperor. To evaluate the adequacy of this reading, I discuss the narration of the chapter as a whole.

Sima Qian opens the chapter by defining the purpose of the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices: “With the height of each era, the *feng* and *shan* are undertaken, and when the period of decline is reached, they are stopped. The performances of them have been separated, at the most distant, by more than a thousand years, and at the very least by several hundred years.”⁸² The *feng* and *shan* sacrifices mark the consolidation of an era. This point is of importance, for it implies a criticism of the attempts by the first emperor and Wudi to use the rituals not only for such a consolidation but also for the purpose of gaining immortality.

With this as background, Sima Qian goes on to narrate the attempted performance of the sacrifices by the first emperor. One of the themes he emphasizes is the conflict between the first emperor and the Ruists. The first emperor called on 70 Ruists to meet him at Mt. Tai and discuss how the sacrifices should be undertaken. Since their opinions were mutually contradictory as well as impractical, he dismissed them and performed the sacrifices on his own.⁸³ While climbing Mt. Tai to perform the *feng* sacrifice, the first emperor encountered violent winds and rain, a fact that, Sima Qian claims, led the Ruists to criticize him.⁸⁴

He goes on to narrate the same stories that occupy the latter part of the “Annals of the First Emperor,” namely the various attempts at immortality made by the emperor.⁸⁵ After narrating the fall of the Qin, Sima Qian sums up the dynasty as follows: “Twelve years after the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices of the first emperor, the Qin was destroyed.”⁸⁶ Considering that the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices were intended to signify the consolidation of an era, this reference to the quick end of the dynasty following the ritual performance strongly underlines the failure of the first emperor.

The historian continues:

All of the Ruist scholars despised the Qin for burning the *Shi* and the *Shu* and for putting to death the scholars, the hundred families represented their laws, and all under Heaven rebelled against them. They all faulted [the first emperor], saying: "When the first emperor climbed Mt. Tai, he was attacked by violent wind and rain and was not able to attain the *feng* and *shan*." Is this not what would be called being without virtue and yet performing the rites?⁸⁷

The first emperor, then, falsely performed the rites: he neither consolidated an era nor possessed the virtue sufficient to undertake the sacrifices. His attempted performance of them is placed in parallel with his search for immortality, an equally doomed effort.

When Sima Qian turns to Wudi, much of the discussion is devoted to a lengthy recounting of how the emperor fell under the influence of one charlatan after another. The narrative follows a general pattern: the emperor accepts a given magician as having powers and then follows the advice of the magician until evidence proves the magician a fraud; the emperor then has the charlatan executed. The superstitiousness of Wudi is thus implied to be comparable to that of the first emperor.

When the narrative turns to the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices under Wudi, parallels with the first emperor are also highlighted. Like the first emperor, Wudi called upon the Ruist scholars to discuss how the rituals should be performed, and like the first emperor he dismissed their ideas for being contradictory and impractical.⁸⁸ There is, however, one major difference. Wudi's performance of the rituals is described as successful: "The *feng* and *shan* sacrifices were given. At night there appeared to be a bright light, and during the day a white cloud arose from the mound of the *feng* ritual."⁸⁹

The success of the sacrifices means, as Sima Qian points out in his opening remarks to the chapter, that Heaven has accepted the dynasty. Thus, when a comet appears after the completion of the rituals, the emperor's officials are quoted by Sima Qian as stating: "Since you have instituted the *feng* and *shan* for the house of Han, Heaven has responded with this star of virtue."⁹⁰

Nonetheless, Wudi thought of the sacrifices as related to immortality as well, and Sima Qian makes it clear that in this sense the rituals were not successful:

After the Son of Heaven performed the *feng* sacrifice at Mt. Tai, there were no wind, rain, or disasters, and the magicians again said that it ap-

peared as though all of the spirits of Penglai could soon be attained.⁹¹ The emperor was ecstatic, thinking that he would soon meet them. He thereupon returned east and went to the sea. He gazed afar, hoping to see Penglai. His carriage driver, Zihou, became violently ill and died in one day. The emperor then departed.⁹²

Since Zihou had accompanied the emperor on his ascent of Mt. Tai to perform the *feng* sacrifice, his death was inauspicious, signifying a failure of some sort. Moreover, the emperor was unable to make contact with the spirits of Penglai, thus revealing the failure of his attempt to gain immortality through the cults.

Sima Qian then closes the narrative portion of the chapter by stating that Wudi had succeeded in instituting the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices, as well as other rituals, for the Han,⁹³ but he also includes an overt criticism of Wudi's superstitiousness:

But as for the magicians sacrificing to the spiritual beings and going out on the sea searching for Penglai, in the end nothing was gained. . . . The Son of Heaven became increasingly tired of the absurd teachings of the magicians, but he was bound by them and could not break free: he still hoped to find true teachings. After this, the magicians' discussions of spirits and sacrifices proliferated, but the results of all of this are plain to see.⁹⁴

Having thus discussed the chapter as a whole, I now return to the questions with which I opened this chapter. Sima Qian clearly presents a critique of Wudi's obsession with magicians and their cults of supernatural phenomena, and he points out the parallels between this obsession and that of the first emperor. Nonetheless, the framework he uses suggests that his criticism may be directed to other issues as well.

Of particular interest here is the fact that Sima Qian opens the chapter by emphasizing that the meaning of the ritual is not one of immortality but of consolidating an era. In this regard, the first emperor and Wudi are presented as missing the point of the sacrifices by using them to achieve immortality, and the historian makes it clear that their efforts in this regard failed miserably. At the same time, he emphasizes that Wudi did successfully complete the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices, and that by doing so the ruler successfully instituted the sacrifices for the Han.

His point here appears to be that, unlike the first emperor, Wudi *does*, for better or for worse, mark the consolidation of an era.⁹⁵ And herein lies the significance of the implicit parallels that the historian draws, in both the “Pingjun shu” and the “Fengshan shu,” between the policies of the first emperor and those of Wudi. I suspect that he presents these parallels in reference to the fact that Wudi had finally succeeded in developing centralized power at the expense of the local rulers—had finally succeeded, in other words, in instituting the kind of imperial government that the first emperor had failed to build. The first emperor and Wudi thus form perfect complements, with the latter having succeeded in accomplishing what the former had introduced but failed to complete.

To underscore the significance of this point, I here review the issues discussed earlier in this chapter. In his writings on the first emperor and Chao Cuo, Sima Qian consistently portrayed the introduction of the imperial system as a transgressive creation, and, insofar as it did not conform to antiquity, as one doomed to failure. But he also portrayed the institutions as necessary in order to prevent the total breakdown of order. The history of empire before Wudi was thus presented as involving a seemingly unresolvable tension: the institutions of empire were both necessary and yet, since they departed from the practices of the past sages, doomed.

Sima Qian’s narrative use of parallels between the first emperor and Wudi is intended to mark the historical means by which this tension came to be resolved. Wudi, Sima Qian implies, took over the transgressive creations of the first emperor and successfully implemented them. The resolution, then, is temporal, and involves the same dualistic model that was so pervasive in Warring States and early Han thought: the transgressive creations of an evil, immoral figure are taken over and successfully utilized by a sage. But what makes Sima Qian’s work so fascinating, and his implied critique of Wudi so penetrating, is that he reverses the narrative emphasis of the dualistic model and thus directs his criticism in a powerful way.

The emphasis in the dualistic models was on divorcing problematic acts from the sage: a transgressive, immoral outsider was presented as introducing problematic aspects of governance, and the fully moral sage was then presented as simply appropriating the creation and using it correctly. Sima Qian employs a similar device in his discussion of the rise and consolidation of empire: each

stage of the process is initiated by an immoral figure or state driven primarily by force, and the process initiated by such figures is then completed and consolidated by Wudi. But the narrative point is reversed. Instead of posing the final order that emerges as fully moral and nontransgressive, Sima Qian uses the model to argue that the final order is based, and completely dependent upon, that which was initiated by the immoral, barbaric figure. Thus the Han dynasty that is consolidated by Wudi (both symbolically through the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices and de facto through the extermination of the power of the local rulers) is fully based upon the creations of the first emperor. Wudi may present himself as a moral sage, Sima Qian argues, but his empire could not have emerged without the creations of the first emperor. Moreover, the structure created by the first emperor undergirds the empire of the Han.

The first emperor and Wudi thus serve as doubles in the emergence of empire in a way comparable to the way that Chi You and Huangdi served as doubles in earlier narratives of the origin of the state. But in Sima Qian's narrative the doubling serves not to emphasize the pure sagacity of the second figure but to underscore the immoral underpinnings of his rule.

Sima Qian's portrait of Wudi, then, is not one of a sage ruling over a consolidated dynasty as powerful and morally centered as that of Huangdi. Instead, it is a portrait of a reign that is historically successful but also based upon the Qin system of coercion. Instead of narrating the successful appropriation of the creations of the immoral outsider, Sima Qian emphasizes the complete dependence of Wudi on those creations; it would be as if, in the narratives discussed in Chapter 3, Huangdi was presented not as a great sage realigning the state with the world of nature but as a dictatorial and somewhat farcical ruler fully dependent upon the creations of the evil Chi You.

We have seen how Sima Qian structures much of his narrative concerning the rise of empire according to a conflict between innovating and following the past, a conflict seen most concretely in the issue of enfeoffment versus imperial centralization. In order to set up a basis for defining these issues, Sima Qian opens by presenting the ancient sage Huangdi not as a creator or even as a consolidator of another's creations but as an institutor of the paradigmatic state. It is according to this basic form of the state that Sima Qian then judges those involved with the much later introduction of empire.

The ensuing study works through the problems of creation by means of a complex technique involving juxtapositions of narrative and moral critique. As a moral critique, the work resonates with statements about the importance of according with the past. For example, the chapter on the first emperor is punctuated by a series of critiques by ministers and scholars to the effect that the Qin empire is doomed as long as it continues to base itself on innovation. When the Qin then falls, those critiques are posed as prescient. Similarly, Sima Qian's own concluding remarks are almost always based on moralized rhetoric about the necessity of following the ancient sages. According to this rhetoric, the historical longevity of a state depends on the degree to which that state follows the past; innovators, then, are doomed. Within such a framework, however, the problem of empire becomes highly important: if morality is defined as that which existed at the time of the earlier sages, then empire, which had been introduced little more than a century before Sima Qian was writing, was by definition immoral.

The problem is highlighted by the fact that Sima Qian does not long for a return to the ways of the earlier sages. On the contrary, he seems to accept the argument found in texts like the *Shangjunshu* that times had changed, and that centralized institutions had become necessary for order. Accordingly, he treats the innovative figures involved in the introduction of empire as sympathetic from a historical point of view: even if unvirtuous and deserving of destruction, they nonetheless took the actions necessary to end the disorder of the Warring States and, later, save the rule of the Han. In particular, both the first emperor and Chao Cuo are presented as correct in their realization that the times necessitated a radical departure from the ways of the past.

This interplay of narrative sympathy and moral critique thus sets up an intriguing ambivalence, wherein acts of creation are both necessary and yet doomed. His argument is that this tension was resolved historically by the reign of Wudi, and, in narrating the resolution, he turns to the dualistic model found in various narratives of the emergence of the state. Wudi, he argues, is the consolidator of the necessary but morally problematic institutions created by the first emperor and reintroduced by Chao Cuo. But instead of posing Wudi as a fully moral sage bringing the creations into the proper order, Sima Qian presents the order that emerges as fully dependent upon what was introduced by the amoral creators.

The narrative thus ends with a consolidated empire, radically different from the feudal rule of Huangdi. Unlike so many of the narratives about the creation of the state, however, the end point of the process looks distinctly worse than the starting point. If Huangdi ruled over a moral state that defended without usurping local power, Wudi ruled over an empire devoted largely to war and extreme centralization. Nonetheless, Sima Qian's narrative makes it clear that there is no going back.⁹⁶

Implications

Sima Qian took a critical stance toward both of the views of creation that were becoming dominant during the reign of Han Wudi. He criticized the notion that, as authors, sages simply distilled patterns in their composition of the classics. I argued that Sima Qian was claiming instead that any act of composition did in fact involve active construction, and therefore was not simply a process of "lifting up" patterns. On the issue of empire, I have argued that Sima Qian was critical of Han Wudi's claims to have consolidated an empire in accord with the patterns of the past and of nature. In both instances, I believe, Sima Qian was arguing that acts of *zuo* did involve inevitable discontinuity that could be neither denied nor overcome.

These claims are of great significance in reflecting upon the development of the debate on creation over the previous several centuries. As noted in the Introduction, Keightley argued: "the universe of moral action, at least as it was represented in the accounts of myth and history, was untrammelled by ambiguities. . . . Cause-and-effect in the universe were rigorously fair; the moral prospered, the wicked did not."⁹⁷ I noted in Chapter 3 that this rule held true for many of the Warring States narratives of the emergence of the state, but that it failed to take account of the deep-rooted concern that discontinuity and transgression may be an inherent part of the emergence of the state, even if they were ultimately overcome in the final order instituted by the sage. Sima Qian not only recognized this point but carefully exploited it in his narrative of the creation of empire. By turning around the narrative emphasis to focus on the degree to which that final order depends upon the earlier transgressions, Sima Qian articulates a fascinating critique of the rise of empire.

At the same time, Sima Qian seems equally interested in the opposite side of this equation: the degree to which the introduction of empire required transgressive figures like the first emperor and Chao Cuo. He argues that the discontinuity marked by figures like the first emperor and Chao Cuo was a necessary part of the rise of empire, and he thus presents them as immoral transgressors who could not, by definition, exhibit the qualities necessary to consolidate what they introduced. Put in teleological terms, they were, Sima Qian maintains, necessary for the unfolding of history even if they were deserving of destruction.

But if Sima Qian has shifted the dualist model to emphasize the inevitability of moments of discontinuity in any act of innovation, then what are the implications of the point? What is intriguing about the work is that Sima Qian provides a critique of his own culture, and it is a critique that could perhaps serve as a corrective to many of the scholarly arguments referred to in the Introduction. Sima Qian recognizes a tension concerning this problem of creation and explores the consequences of it by tracing the rise of empire through a meditation on the problem. His emphasis on ambivalent figures is thus part of a larger study of his own culture, one based not so much in denying a moral paradigm but in showing the implications of such a paradigm when applied to the workings of history.

Sima Qian does indeed, then, provide a narrative along the lines that Keightley described: he presents the rise of empire through a framework in which those who are moral and connected to the past are rewarded and those who are immoral and not so connected are punished. And just as would be expected in such a framework, transgressive creators are destroyed. But, in emphasizing the degree to which the introduction of empire required transgressions like this, Sima Qian demonstrates a place where, in the development of history, a tragic possibility exists: the creation of a new order requires a transgressive action, yet that transgression is intrinsically in opposition to the order that the figure is trying to create. This, of course, is the same point referred to earlier in the discussion of the narratives of the sages, only here the moral is reversed: instead of proclaiming the ultimate victory of proper order, Sima Qian emphasizes the degree to which the order thus achieved is based upon transgression.

In opposition to the earlier narratives of the rise of the state, then, he denies that the transgression of the act of creation can be divorced from the later ap-

appropriation of what was created. In other words, he denies the mechanism that had been used to allow for acts of creation while also denying their negative implications. Yes, he is saying, that which was transgressively created can later be successfully consolidated and implemented, but it is still transgressive.

His goal, then, is to read the introduction of empire through the lens of a moralist, with the result that the narrative of the rise of empire becomes a meditation on the tragedy of creation. If acts of creation are assigned the negative position but are nonetheless necessary, then there is a fundamental ambivalence: creation is both necessary and yet outside the moral and natural cycles that should normatively define the historical process. And Sima Qian's point is that this is a necessary corollary to the idea that only that which existed in the time of the sages, or, put in naturalistic terms, only that which existed originally in nature, is morally acceptable. As such, one is caught in an inescapable paradox: only by returning to the past can there be true morality, but once one accepts that discontinuity is inevitable, such a return is impossible. Whether it be in the act of sages distilling patterns from nature or of emperors claiming links to the past, discontinuity is inevitably introduced. In his time, therefore, Sima Qian claimed that imperial institutions may be immoral and fully derived from the creations of an arrogant first emperor, but returning to the feudal institutions of the past, or returning to the patterns of the natural world, was simply not an option. And the claim that empire is in fact in continuity with the past and with the world of nature, Sima Qian seems to imply, is folly.⁹⁸

Sima Qian, then, is not, despite some scholars' claims, a conservative who longs for a return to the past before the discontinuity that occurred with the creation of empire. On the contrary, he makes it clear in his narrative that empire was, at that stage in Chinese history, necessary. Sima Qian's critique demanded a proper accounting, called for an admission that transgressive acts can never be fully expiated, that empire, if transgressively created, remained transgressive: if empire was created as a dictatorial system, then so will it remain. He was, in other words, strongly opposed to the idea that it was possible simply to displace creation to a rebel and then claim that a sage, in this case Han Wudi, had appropriated what was created and successfully realigned it with nature and the ancestors. Such, I have argued, is Sima Qian's implicit view of history, namely that there can be no act of creation without a concurrent destruction, and hence no honest appropriation of what was created without an admission

of discontinuity. Thus, even while presenting empire as absolutely necessary, as the rightful new norm for society, Sima Qian seems always to have an underlying sense of loss, a sense of a past that is forever gone. His goal, in essence, was to expose the mechanism, seen also in some of the narratives of the origin of the state and in sacrificial practice, by which Han Wudi was able to claim that, however created, empire itself was fully moral, fully in accord with the divine, and fully linked to the original state organized by the great sage Huangdi.

tial evidence for this interpretation can be seen in one of the statements quoted above. When a comet appeared after the completion of the rituals, Emperor Wu's officials are said to have stated: "Since you have instituted the *feng* and *shan* for the house of Han, Heaven has responded with this star of virtue" (*Shiji*, 28.1399). The offerings were described as successful, in other words, when Heaven responded to reveal its acceptance. It may then be that the intended recipients of the earlier sacrifices were the same as those of the later forms.

130. *Shiji*, 28.1402.

131. Loewe, "The Concept of Sovereignty," p. 740.

Chapter 5

1. The exact dates of Sima Qian's life have long been debated. One of the more influential discussions was provided by Wang Guowei, who placed Sima Qian's date of birth at 145 B.C.; see "Taishigong xingnian kao." Other scholars dispute this date, including Guo Moruo, who argued 135 B.C. was more plausible; see "'Taishigong xingnian kao' you wenti." This latter date is supported by Zhang Dake as well in *Shiji yanjiu*, pp. 108–20; see pp. 74–107 for a cogent discussion of the issues involved in determining the chronology of Sima Qian's life.

2. *Shiji*, 130.3297.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Shiji*, 130.3297–3298.

5. *Ibid.*, 130.3299.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Shiji*, 130.3299–3300.

8. *Ibid.*, 130.3300.

9. *Ibid.*, 130.3301–3320. See Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, pp. 90–91; Watson also correctly points out that in similar contexts Ban Gu, a far more orthodox historian than Sima Qian, always used the term *shu* (transmit) instead of *zuo*; see Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, p. 223 n. 31. I would also read Ban Gu's statement that Sima Qian created (*zuo*) the "Benji" section (*Hanshu* 100B.4235) as an implied criticism of Sima Qian.

10. Stephen W. Durrant has argued that Sima Qian tries, in the *Shiji*, to write a text like the *Spring and Autumn Annals* but that he fails because of psychological conflicts and ends up writing a very different work; see Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror*, esp. pp. 1–71. See also my review of Durrant's book in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 57, no. 1 (1997): 290–301.

11. I should also state that, overall, I read the *Shiji* itself as a series of meditations on historiographic and cultural problems. My reading, therefore, is largely in agreement with that of Willard Peterson; see Peterson, "Ssu-ma Ch'ien as Cultural Historian."

12. *Shiji*, 61.2121.

13. *Ibid.*, 61.2122-2123.

14. *Ibid.*, 61.2124-2125.

15. *Ibid.*, 61.2127. The "Wenyan" passage is almost identical to the one quoted by Sima Qian; see *Zhouyi*, HY, 2/1.

16. *Shiji*, 61.2127.

17. *Ibid.*, 1.46.

18. For example, Mark Lewis reads this section on Huangdi as "a 'true' and 'plausible' account of the career of the Yellow Emperor [i.e., Huangdi] as it appeared to a literate, critical Chinese of the second century B.C. . . ."; see Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, p. 174.

19. *Shiji*, 1.3.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, 15.685.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 15.686.

31. *Ibid.*

32. The five *di*, it may be remembered, were the sage heroes of the past, the first of whom was Huangdi. Although authors differed about who the other four were, the term "five *di*" was nonetheless used widely to refer to the early sages.

33. *Shiji*, 6.236.

34. *Ibid.*, 6.238-239.

35. *Ibid.*, 6.239.

36. *Ibid.*, 6.254.

37. *Ibid.*, 6.254-255.

38. *Ibid.*, 6.255.

39. Derk Bodde, for one, argues that many of these more fantastic anecdotes, including the one I discuss next, are probably without historical basis (“The State and Empire of Ch’in,” pp. 80, 94–98).

40. *Shiji*, 6.248.

41. *Ibid.*, 6.276.

42. Zhang Dake also notes that, despite his strong criticisms of the first emperor, Sima Qian does praise his accomplishments; see *Shiji yanjiu*, pp. 362–63. Zhang explains this by arguing that Sima Qian is unequivocally in favor of unity, and thus, although he opposes the way that the first emperor used violence against the populace, he still sees the Qin’s use of violence in order to achieve unity as a great contribution. I discuss this argument in more depth below.

43. Burton Watson reads Sima Qian as giving a purely negative portrait of the first emperor. He further argues that Sima Qian holds a cyclical vision of history, defined by the rise and fall of dynasties. Under Watson’s reading, Sima Qian presents the first emperor as the stereotypical evil last ruler of the state of Qin. The history of the Qin, in other words, should be read as a “dynasty” of sorts, with the first emperor as the dynasty’s degenerate terminator; see *Ssu-ma Ch’ien*, p. 6.

I interpret Sima Qian’s portrait quite differently. In Sima Qian’s reading, the first emperor is indeed the culmination of the history of the Qin state, in the sense that he culminates their barbaric, transgressive qualities, but his historical importance lies in the fact that he is a creator *outside* the normative dynastic cycles. Far from being a stereotypical evil last ruler, he is a transgressive creator foreign to the cycles of history. The implication of this is that Sima Qian’s view of history is not purely cyclical; as regards the issues that are the focus of this chapter, for example, he is interested in exploring how something new can be introduced into the cycle of rising and falling dynasties. The point is of some importance, for, as defined in works such as the *Mencius*, the dynastic cycle, insofar as it equates dynastic success with the degree to which the past is imitated, would not allow for innovation.

44. In discussing Sima Qian’s portrait of these two figures, I focus on the way that Sima Qian presents the reasons for their respective success and failure. For an analysis of how Sima Qian paints the different personalities of Xiang Yu and Liu Bang, see Zhang Dake, *Shiji yanjiu*, p. 312. For a discussion of Sima Qian’s presentation of Xiang Yu’s personality in particular, see Nie, *Sima Qian lungao*, pp. 189–97.

45. *Shiji*, 7.300.

46. *Ibid.*, 7.320.

47. Ibid., 7.321.
48. Ibid., 7.331.
49. Ibid., 7.331–332.
50. Ibid., 7.333.
51. Ibid., 7.334.
52. Ibid., 7.338–339.
53. Ibid., 7.339.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.

56. Ji Zhenhuai criticizes Sima Qian's moral reading of the fall of Xiang Yu and the success of Liu Bang as based in a notion of fate; see *Sima Qian*, p. 110. However, I hope that the following discussion will make it clear that Sima Qian's reading of history is far more complex than such a characterization might imply.

57. Since many of the policies of Liu Bang were discussed earlier, I will simply review here Sima Qian's presentation of the counterpoint between the ruler and Xiang Yu.

58. *Shiji*, 8.381.
59. Ibid., 8.379.
60. Ibid.

61. Here again, my interest in this section is to outline Sima Qian's presentation of the historical significance of Liu Bang for the rise of empire. For a discussion of Sima Qian's portrayal of the personality of Liu Bang, see Nie, *Sima Qian lungao*, pp. 93–95, 197–205. Nie notes in particular many of the implicit criticisms made by Sima Qian concerning the personality of Liu Bang.

62. As mentioned in the previous chapter, “Gaozu” is the posthumous name given to Liu Bang. In his narrative of the figure, Sima Qian switches the appellation from Liu Bang to Gaozu upon the ruler's acceptance of the imperial position. For ease of reference, I do the same here.

Sima Qian's treatment of Xiang Yu and Liu Bang may at first glance seem surprising. In more recent studies, Xiang Yu is often said to have rejected empire and to have attempted to start a confederacy of states with himself as a hegemon. These acts would make it seem that Xiang Yu was attempting to turn back the clock to a pre-imperial system of governance (see, for example, Loewe, “The Former Han Dynasty,” p. 116). In contrast, Liu Bang took the title of emperor and organized part of the land according to the Qin system of commanderies. Given this, it may seem that it was Xiang Yu, not Gaozu, who attempted to conform to the past.

Although there may be some historical basis for such a reading, it is important

to note that Sima Qian reaches the opposite conclusion. From the perspective of a moral reading, Sima Qian argues, the problem with Xiang Yu is that he did *not* fully follow the past, or more precisely, he began by following the past but ultimately turned his back on it. In contrast, Liu Bang did, to a much greater extent, conform to antiquity by returning in large part to the practice of enfeoffment.

63. *Shiji*, 8.382–391.

64. *Ibid.*, 8.391. Some of Sima Qian's portrayals of the problems encountered in the Han practice of enfeoffment are discussed by Nie, *Sima Qian lungao*, pp. 112–17.

65. *Shiji*, 101.2745.

66. *Ibid.*, 101.2746.

67. *Ibid.*, 101.2747. The radicalness of Chao Cuo's alteration of the laws is stressed in several places throughout the text; see, for example, 96.2684.

68. *Ibid.*, 101.2746 and 101.2747, respectively.

69. *Ibid.*, 101.2747.

70. *Ibid.*, 101.2747–2748.

71. *Ibid.*, 106.2824.

72. Both of these were prerogatives of the central court. As noted in Chapter 4, one of the narratives of the invention of weapons presented Chi You appropriating resources that were reserved for use by the unified state of Huangdi. The narrative in question (the “Di shu” chapter of the *Guanzi*) was probably written during the early Han as well, when this was a strong concern of the central state.

73. *Shiji*, 106.2824–2825.

74. *Ibid.*, 101.2748.

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*, 106.2836.

77. *Ibid.*, 11.449.

78. Nie (*Sima Qian lungao*, pp. 55–56) argues that Sima Qian supported a rule of virtue over a rule of law, and this is why he denounced figures like Chao Cuo. Although it is true that Sima Qian had a generally negative opinion of imperial institutions, it is nonetheless important to note that, in the narrative portions of his writings, the work of figures like Chao Cuo is posed as historically necessary.

79. See, for example, Ji, *Sima Qian*, pp. 94–95; Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, pp. 33–36; and Su, “*Shiji shi dui Han Wudi de pipan shu*,” pp. 75–100. Zhang Dake makes this point as well (*Shiji yanjiu*, pp. 396–400), although he also argues that Sima Qian is generally in favor of Wudi's consolidation of centralized rule (p. 394). This point is discussed below.

80. *Shiji*, 30.1442–1443.

81. Watson, for example, notes in his translation of the chapter that Sima Qian's concluding remarks against the Qin are in fact a thinly veiled critique of the policies of Wudi; see *Records of the Grand Historian*, vol. 2, p. 106. Su ("Shiji," p. 90) argues the same point, as does Zhang Dake (*Shiji yanjiu*, p. 28).

82. *Shiji*, 28.1355.

83. *Ibid.*, 28.1366–1367.

84. *Ibid.*, 28.1367.

85. *Ibid.*, 28.1368–1370.

86. *Ibid.*, 28.1371.

87. *Ibid.*

88. *Ibid.*, 28.1397, 1398.

89. *Ibid.*, 28.1398.

90. *Ibid.*, 28.1399.

91. Penglai was a land of immortals.

92. *Shiji*, 28.1398.

93. *Ibid.*, 28.1403.

94. *Ibid.*, 28.1403–1404.

95. The claim that Wudi successfully consolidated centralized rule appears elsewhere in the *Shiji* as well (as in his explanation to the unwritten "Annals of Wudi," 130.3303). Zhang Dake also notes that Sima Qian sees Wudi as having consolidated centralized rule (*Shiji yanjiu*, p. 394).

96. A number of other analyses have been given of Sima Qian's view of empire. Many, following Sima Qian's generally negative presentation of the first emperor and Wudi, have read Sima Qian as being largely opposed to imperial centralization. For example, Burton Watson goes so far as to describe Sima Qian as a conservative who longs for earlier times, and who could not see that the policies of Wudi were necessary in order to maintain order (*Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, p. 36). A similar point is argued by Ji Zhenhuai (*Sima Qian*, p. 111). Such arguments, however, fail to take into account the numerous places in the work where Sima Qian does emphasize, albeit reluctantly, the necessity of imperial institutions.

Other scholars have noted such elements and have therefore attempted to account for this seeming ambivalence in Sima Qian's presentation. The most interesting studies to confront this issue include those by Zhang Dake and Nie Shiqiao.

As mentioned in a previous note, Zhang Dake recognizes that Sima Qian, while strongly attacking the first emperor, still sees him as having played an important historical role (*Shiji yanjiu*, pp. 362–63). Elsewhere, Zhang makes the

same point concerning Wudi: in some places Sima Qian criticizes his ruler, yet in several other places he shows great admiration for the emperor. Zhang attempts to explain this apparent inconsistency by isolating the differing normative criteria that Sima Qian utilizes in making these judgments. On the one hand, unlike Ji Zhenhuai and Burton Watson, Zhang believes that Sima Qian does support centralization, and indeed that he holds an essentially progressivist view of history vis-à-vis the problem of empire (pp. 395–96). This is why, in some passages, the historian praises both the first emperor and Wudi for their contributions in instituting centralized rule (pp. 362–63; 395–96). On the other hand, Sima Qian strongly opposes acts of oppression against the people, and for this reason he criticizes the ruthlessness of the two emperors (pp. 362–63; 396–400). Zhang thus accounts for the seeming ambivalence of Sima Qian's presentation by attempting to distinguish the various normative criteria supposedly utilized by the historian.

A somewhat related argument, albeit with different emphases, is given by Nie Shiqiao (*Sima Qian lungao*, pp. 54–55). Like Zhang, Nie believes that Sima Qian strongly supports unity; this is why he gives some approval to both the first emperor and Wudi, and also why he criticizes the rebellious local rulers. Nonetheless, he argues, Sima Qian strongly opposes the use of legalistic methods to gain such unity, and his work is thus designed to expose the hypocrisy of the unity achieved by Wudi (p. 58). Along these same lines, as it was noted in an earlier footnote, Nie argues that Sima Qian was strongly opposed to the policy of Chao Cuo (p. 56).

Both Zhang and Nie, then, try to read these apparently contradictory views of Sima Qian as resulting from a basic division in his thinking: he supports unification but opposes legalist institutions. I would argue, on the contrary, that the seeming ambivalence arises not because he is upholding differing normative criteria but because of his view of history, and specifically because of his views concerning the way in which empire was introduced. The problem for Sima Qian, as I read it, is the opposite of that ascribed to him by Nie and Zhang: the problem is not that he sees unity and legalist institutions as distinguishable, with the former deserving praise and the latter deserving rejection; the problem is rather that he views unity and legalist institutions as inseparably linked.

Contrary to Zhang's claim, then, I do not believe that Sima Qian favors imperial centralization unequivocally; instead, he sees centralization as a necessary, if in many ways deplorable, historical development. And contrary to Nie's claim, I would say that, although Sima Qian frequently, especially in his closing comments, presents legalist practices as immoral, he also sees such practices as

directly linked to the issue of unity. For example, Nie's statement that Chao Cuo is simply criticized by Sima Qian fails to take into account the relatively sympathetic treatment accorded his legalist policies in various narrative sections of the work. The description of Sima Qian as resolutely opposed to legalism is thus only partially right, insofar as it fails to note the complexity of his treatment of history. It is because of this complexity that one can get readings as distinctive as those of Watson and Ji on the one hand and Zhang and Nie on the other.

97. Keightley, "Early Civilization in China," p. 20.

98. Zhang Dake (*Shiji yanjiu*, pp. 374–75) argues that one of Sima Qian's great contributions to Chinese historiography was that he developed a progressivist view of history to replace the earlier cyclical conception. Such a formulation, however, is misleading. Although it is true that Sima Qian does not see history in purely cyclical terms, he also cannot be said to hold a truly progressivist view. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he poses history as accumulative, in the sense that once institutions have been introduced it is not possible to return to an earlier period. But he does not believe that such an accumulative process is necessarily good. Indeed, on the introduction of imperial centralization, which Zhang reads Sima Qian as posing in progressivist terms (pp. 395–96), I have argued that Sima Qian does, from a moral perspective, long for the past, even while supporting the notions that the introduction of empire was necessary and that a rejection of empire would result in total chaos.

Appendix

1. Zeng, "'Zuo' zi tanyuan."
2. This is the view of Guo Moruo. See Li Xiaoding, *Jiagu wenzi jishi*, vol. 8, p. 2637.
3. Tsung-tung Chang, *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie*, p. 215.
4. Zhu, "Shi zuo."
5. Zeng, "'Zuo' zi tanyuan," p. 411.
6. *Heji* 9472.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Zeng, "'Zuo' zi tanyuan," pp. 412–16.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 419. Axel Schuessler gives the pronunciations as *dzjak* for *ji* and *tsak* for *zuo*; see *A Dictionary of Early Zhou Chinese*, pp. 268 and 874 respectively. Schuessler's phonetic reconstructions are based primarily on Li Fanggui's system.
10. Zeng, "'Zuo' zi tanyuan," p. 419.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 419–20.
12. *Heji* 25892. Although a context is lacking for understanding the exact