

On Sima Qian's Praises to the Ruler

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Abstract. Sima Qian took himself as Confucius' inheritor in *His Honor the Grand Scribe's* self-annotation. He changed his attitude suddenly to say that his book narrated, but not create after Husui posed the problem. Why Was Sima Qian so inconsistent? As a historian, Sima Qian couldn't make the emperor unsatisfied. He had to let emperor trust him. So he stressed that his history book was to praise the ruler and he narrated, but not create to protect himself averting disasters and crises.

Introduction

In *Thus Spoke, The Master* which was a Confucian classic to record Confucius' dialogues, Confucius said: "I narrate, said the Master, but not create. I believe and delight in the ancients." He did so exactly. However, it was confusing that Sima Qian, the author of *The Grand Scribe's Records*, said that he praised the ruler and narrated, but not creates. [1]

The Praises to the Ruler in *His Honor the Grand Scribe's* Self-annotation

A passage in *His Honor the Grand Scribe's* self-annotation was difficult to interpret:

His Honor the Grand Scribe said: "The ancestor said: 'Confucius was born since Zhougong was dead five hundred years later. It had been five hundred years since Confucius was dead. There must be someone that could inherit the clear and bright era, understand the Appendices correctly, inherit Confucian Chunqiu, accord to the essential meaning of Shi(the Book of Songs), Shangshu (The Book of History), Book of Rites, Music.' Perhaps that was me! Perhaps that was me! How could the spawn decline?"

Upper Senior Official Husui said: "Why did Confucius make *Chunqiu*?" *His Honor the Grand Scribe* said: "...*Chunqiu* illustrated three King's Taoism, distinguished Confucian Ethical code among people, eliminated the suspicions, distinct between right and wrong, determined the hesitation things, praised kindness, condemned ugliness, eulogized the good men, accused the bad men, vitalized the dying country, kept on the breaking line, repaired the incomplete sets, and so on. All of these were major aspects of kingly way thought.

Husui said: "Confucius made *Chunqiu* to discuss the gains and losses of propriety and righteousness in case of making it a statute – book of the wise monarch when there weren't wise and valiant monarch and the virtuous persons weren't appointed. Today you met the great Son of the Heaven and had been a official. Everything of the country was ready and each was in his proper time. What did you want to do in writing this book?"

His Honor the Grand Scribe said: "Yes, yes. No, no, It was not so. The great Son of the Heaven got the auspicious signs, offered the sacrifices to heaven and earth, issued the new calendar, changed the colour of the emperor's carriages, horses, and

formal attires since the Han Dynasty established. Our emperor was determined by God and his bounties spread widely. So countless national people with various customs came to pay tribute and make obeisances through numerous translations. The officials hadn't expressed their meaning adequately though they tried their best to sing praises. It was the emperor's disgrace if one capable person wasn't appointed. It was the official's failure if the brilliant emperor's moral integrity and achievements couldn't be spread. As an official historian, it was a serious sin to let my father down if I hadn't written the achievements of the brilliant emperor and the deeds of the meritorious statesmen, the aristocratic families and the virtuous grand masters. Otherwise, I just said that I was not to create, but was only to narrate the historical events and sort out the deeds. So you were wrong to compare my book as *Chunqiu*." [2]

Sima Tan, Sima Qian's father, said that it was time for another sage to come into the world except Duke Zhou and Confucius. Who was more qualified to be this sage except Sima Qian? The thought that there should be one Sage every five hundred years was the popular belief about social progress at that time. *Chapter on Astronomers* in *The Grand Scribe's Records* had the corresponding recordation:

The Will of Heaven had a small change every thirty years, a moderate change every one hundred years, a great change every five hundred years. Three great changes were a Ji. Three Ji were the cycle and major limit of the Heaven Fate change. The ruler could completely understand the relationship between human being and nature only they paid great attention to the change cycle of thirty years and five hundred years and investigate the variation during two thousand years. [3]

Sima Qian took himself as Confucius' inheritor and sang high praise for *Chunqiu*'s historical function. Nothing was important than learning *Chunqiu* if one country wanted to set things right. The prince wouldn't be a prince, the minister not a minister, the father not a father, the son not a son if *Chunqiu* wasn't understood. Though Sima Qian took himself as Confucius' inheritor, *The Grand Scribe's Records* should be a historical work to inherit *Chunqiu*. But Hu Sui posed a embarrassing problem that why Sima Qian wanted to write *The Grand Scribe's Records*. Confucius wrote *Chunqiu* because propriety was broken and music was fallen in the late Spring and Autumn Period. Sima Qian lived at the time of Emperor Wu in Han Dynasty. Hu Sui's question made Sima Qian is in a dangerous situation. That was to say, the time of Emperor Wu was as same as the late Spring and Autumn Period if Sima Qian had learned from Confucius to write *Chunqiu*. Didn't he slander the strong and integrated Han Dynasty as Emperor Wu's contemporaries?

Sima Qian, who confidently took himself as Confucius' inheritor, was overwhelmed to be in an awkward predicament facing Hu Sui's dreadful question. "Weiwei" means "yes". "Foufou" and "Buran" mean "No". These words vividly showed Sima Qian's embarrassment. He didn't know how to say with an ambiguous attitude. Qian Zhongshu explained the dialogues:

Perhaps Sima Qian wanted to weaken the stern rebuff tone with "Weiwei" for he wouldn't deny Hu Sui's expression. [4]

Sima Qian's attitude changed suddenly to praise Emperor Wu in order to get rid of the political risk caused by Hu Sui's question. He said that the ministers didn't wholly extolled Emperor Wu's greatness even though they had done their best. As an official historian, Sima Qian's duty was to praise the achievements of the emperor and the deeds of the meritorious statesmen, the aristocratic families and the virtuous grand masters. If he couldn't do that, he would violate his father (Si Matan)'s ardent hopes. Sima Qian particularly declared that he was not to create, but was only to narrate the

historical events and sort out the deeds. His history book didn't interfere the politics as same as Chunqiu. Chunqiu had current political purpose to eliminate the suspicions, distinct between right and wrong, determine the hesitation things, praise kindness, condemn ugliness, eulogize the good men, accuse the bad men, vitalize the dying country, keep on the breaking line, repair the incomplete sets. Wasn't Sima Qian inconsistent? He once praised Chunqiu taking himself as Confucius' inheritor, then denied learning from Confucius? While seeing these exculpatory words, we were surprised that Sima Qian's flattery to the ruler was disgusting to the extreme. It was stunning that Sima Qian was ill fitted to fulfil our ideal of *His Honor the Grand Scribe* figure criticizing the reality. Why did he write in this way? Did he ingratiate himself with Emperor Wu and the court officials? Was *The Grand Scribe's Records* a flattering history book?

The Critical Descriptions about the Rulers in the Han Dynasty in *The Grand Scribe's Records*

The persons who had read *The Grand Scribe's Records* knew it wasn't a flattering book. Sima Qian criticized many rulers in the Han Dynasty such as Emperor Han Gaozu, Liu Bang; Empress Lv; Emperor Hanjing, Liu Qi; Emperor Hanwu, Liu Che more or less, directly or indirectly. Many scholars had mentioned this in their writings. Here was my short list:

- Descriptions about Emperor Han Gaozu, Liu Bang. Sima Qian described Liu Bang's brute nature in the text *Xiang Yu*. Liu Bang escaped after he was beaten at Pengcheng. On the road, he met his son, later Emperor Hui, and his daughter, later Queen Yuan of Lu, and made them ride in his carriage. When Xiang Yu's cavalry came hot on their heels, Liu Bang pushed his children out. This happened three times.
- Descriptions about Empress Lv. Sima Qian described the cruelty of Empress Lv in many texts. She killed Peng Yue, Han Xin. She crafted Lady Qi as a Homunculus without any limb. She killed the first Shao Emperor of the Western Han Dynasty and three kings of Zhao Kingdom. She poisoned the King Ru-yi of Zhao Kingdom, Lady Qi's son. She made the King Liu You of Zhao Kingdom die of starvation. She killed a beloved concubine of the King Liu Hui of Zhao Kingdom by poisoned wine and led to his suicide.
- Descriptions about Emperor Hanwen, Liu Heng. Liu Heng was considered to be frugal, modest, tolerant and benevolent, but Sima Qian still criticized him. In *Zhang Shizhi and Feng Tang* in *The Grand Scribe's Records*, Emperor Hanwen wanted to put the man to death who frightened the horse of the imperial carriage. At last the man was fined on Zhang Shizhi's insistence. Zhang Shizhi was the chief justice. This event showed Emperor Hanwen's narrow-mindedness.
- Descriptions about Emperor Hanjing, Liu Qi. Sima Qian described Emperor Hanjing's sharpness to the crown prince Liu Rong and the meritorious official Zhou Yafu. The crown prince Liu Rong was relegated to the King Linjiang. He got guilty for occupying the vacant land around the Ancestral Temple to build the royal palace for himself. He was arrested into the Lieutenant House. At last, he committed suicide for the unbearable abasement. Zhou Yafu made strict military disciplines and played an important role on pacifying the revolt led by Seven Princes. However, Zhou Yafu was put into the prison because of false accusation. Zhou Yafu was reported to revolt and was arrested because his son bought five hundred sacrificial weapons and armours for him from the factory servicing only

- the royal court. Later he died of starvation in prison with very great credits.
- Descriptions about Emperor Hanwu, Liu Che. In *The Hsiung-nu*, Sima Qian didn't agree with Emperor Wu's policy towards Hsiung-nu, especially "Mayi Plot" and Yanran Mountain War in which the loss outweighed the gains but wasting blood and treasures. In the *Anecdotes of Fengshan*, there were vivid descriptions that Emperor Hanwu was infatuated with seeking immortality.

The Reasons that Sima Qian Praised the Ruler in the Han Dynasty

Clearly, *The Grand Scribe's Records* wasn't a flattering book. However, why did Sima Qian want to put an attractively flattering label on his history book?

Some scholars had realized Sima Qian's self-contradiction. Yao Zhutian in the Jin Dynasty said:

It was fantastic that Sima Qian compared *The Grand Scribe's Records* to *Chunqiu* obviously, and denied others question immediately. [5]

Han Zhaoqi said that these praising words that Sima Qian answered Husui carried with fire in one hand and water in the other. [6]

In *The Grand Scribe's Records*, Cheng Jinzao enlarged upon Sima Qian's words: *Otherwise, I just said that I was not to create, but was only to narrate the historical events and sort out the deeds. So you were wrong to compare my book as Chunqiu.* Cheng Jinzao reviewed that Sima Qian decided to carry on his father's ambition to make *Chunqiu* clearly, but he said Husui was wrong who compared *The Grand Scribe's Records* to *Chunqiu*. It was Sima Qian who compared *The Grand Scribe's Records* to *Chunqiu*, but he said that Husui did. Sima Qian's words were so clever and crafty. [7]

As a historian, Sima Qian couldn't make the emperor unsatisfied because of writing history. Writing history could bring political risks, especially there were many contents involving contemporary history in *The Grand Scribe's Records*. He had to let emperor trust him. So he stressed that his history book was to praise the emperor and he was not to create, but was only to narrate the historical events and sort out the deeds without the desire to criticize the reality.

So Ling Zhilong quoted from Zhaozheng's words: "The passage means that Sima Qian wanted to protect himself averting disasters and crises. [8]

Xu Fuyuan said: "Sima Qian was afraid of the disasters of slanderous book." [9]

Conclusions

So we should not just consider that *The Grand Scribe's Records* was a book praising the ruler via Sima Qian's self-expression. We should experience the contents he wanted to say but he hadn't say behind his words.

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