A Journal of My Misgivings

Liang Yusheng, Sima Qian, and the History of Qin

Jeffrey Riegel

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Katherine Lawn Chouta, Managing Editor
Institute of East Asian Studies
1995 University Avenue, Suite 510H
Berkeley, CA 94704-2318 USA
ieaseditor@berkeley.edu

Institute *of*
East Asian Studies
University of California, Berkeley

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Katherine Lawn Chouta, Managing Editor
Institute of East Asian Studies
1995 University Avenue, Suite 510H
Berkeley, CA 94720
ieaseditor@berkeley.edu

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Contents

Preface ix
Abbreviations, Maps, Tables, and Technical Notes xv

I. LIANG YUSHENG AND THE COMPOSITION OF *A JOURNAL OF MY MISGIVINGS*

1 The Life and Legacy of Liang Yusheng 3
2 The Methods and Sources of an Eighteenth-Century Historian 50

II. QIN HISTORY REVISED

3 The Founders of the Qin Ruling Lineage and Their Heirs 123
4 Kings and Emperors 197
5 The Cultural and Administrative Geography of Qin 294
6 Warfare 367

Liang Yusheng on *Shiji* Chronology 465
Epilogue: Liang Yusheng and the *Shiji* 489
Bibliography 495
Index 523

ONLINE SUPPLEMENT

http://ieas.berkeley.edu/publications/crm79.html
Appendixes and Tables
1. Liang Yusheng's Notes on the *Guo Qin lun* of Jia Yi
2. Textual Criticism and the Making of the Zhonghua shuju Edition of the *Shiji*
Finding List

Preface

The *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) is one of the monuments of early Chinese literature. In an ambitious 130-scroll compendium, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (b. 145 BCE) assembled canonical texts, historical records, court documents, and genealogies, as well as compilations of anecdotes, exercises in persuasion, dramatizations of historical vignettes, orally transmitted accounts, and personal observations. He quoted, revised, reworked, and added to these sources in order to tell the story of the founding and first decades of the Han dynasty and the rise and fall of the dynasties and ruling houses that preceded the Han. Although classified both popularly and in traditional bibliographies as a work of history, the *Shiji* defies easy categorization. Sima Qian served in an official post that combined the duties of scribe, historian, and astrologer at the court of Emperor Wu 武帝 (141–87 BCE) in the Han dynasty capital of Chang'an. But his *Shiji* was a private work done for personal reasons, not an official compilation undertaken as part of his formal government responsibilities. Its original title, *Tai shi gong shu* 太史公書 (Documents of the Grand Historian), calls attention to its author rather than his text's subject. Judged outside the expectations of the genre to which it was assigned, the *Shiji* can be understood as the embodiment of Sima Qian's views and values—his philosophy—illustrated by the versions he constructed of the lives and deeds of earlier figures as well as of his contemporaries.

Yet because Sima Qian inspired a subsequent lineage of court historians who compiled standard, or dynastic, histories, he was referred to as the *shijia zhi zong* 史家之宗 (first ancestor of the court historians), and the *Shiji* came to be identified as the *Zhengshi zhi shou* 正史之首: "The beginning of the Standard Histories." Traditional historiography from the earliest commentaries written on the *Shiji* to studies done by modern scholars

Abbreviations, Maps, Tables, and Technical Notes

Abbreviations

Jiaokan	Zhang Wenhu, *Jiaokan Shiji jijie suoyin zhengyi zhaji*
GSR	*The Grand Scribe's Records*, *Records of the Grand Scribe*
LYC	"Finding List of Liang Yusheng's Critiques of Qin-Related Passages in the *Shiji*"
MH	Edouard Chavannes, *Les mémoires historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien*
SJZY	*Shiji zhiyi*
SKQSZM	*Siku quanshu zongmu*

The formula (xGE>y seen occasionally in the footnotes herein indicates that graph x is an error for graph y.

Maps

The Shifting of the Qin Capital 301
Qin's Attacks on Wei, Han, and Zhao 389

Tables

2.1 *Shiji* Chapters and Passages on the Rise of Qin Online Supplement
2.2 Commentaries to Sources Other than the *Shiji* Online Supplement
2.3 *Biji* and Miscellaneous Notes Cited by Liang Yusheng Online Supplement

3.1 The Lines of Succession in Qin 150
3.2 Liang Yusheng's Comments on Figures in Qin History Online Supplement
4.1 Qin's Kings and Emperors 198
5.1 The "Qin Records" List of Qin Rulers and Their Burial Places 328
5.2 The Thirty-Six Qin Commanderies According to Liang Yusheng 343
6.1 The Victims of Qin's Wars: A Head Count 401
6.2 A Chronology of Qin's Preunification Battles Online Supplement
A.1 Liang Yusheng's Corrections to the *Shiji* Chronology of Qin Online Supplement
A.2 Liang Yusheng's Emendations to the Text of the *Shiji* Online Supplement
A.2.1 The Lineages of the Song and Ming Editions of the *Shiji* Online Supplement
A.2.2 The Ancestry of the Jinling and Zhonghua Editions of the *Shiji* Online Supplement

The *pinyin* transcription of Modern Standard Chinese is used throughout this volume. When passages from works that use other systems are quoted herein, their transcriptions have been changed to *pinyin*.

CHAPTER 1

The Life and Legacy of Liang Yusheng

A good, though brief, introduction in English to Liang Yusheng's life, family, social background, and scholarly works is the biographical notice written by Tu Lien-che 杜聯喆 (1902–1994) and included in Arthur Hummel's *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*.

> Liang Yusheng 梁玉繩 (*zi* [Yaobei] 曜北 *hao* [Jian'an] 諫庵, [Qingbaishi] 清白士, [Wuxinzi] 無心子), Jan. 15, 1745–1819, scholar, was a native of Qiantang 錢塘 (Hangzhou). He was a son of Liang Dunshu 梁敦書 [1725–1786], a grandson of Liang Shizheng 梁詩正 [1697–1763], and an adopted son of Liang Tongshu 梁同書 [1723–1815]. Having failed eight times in the provincial examinations, he decided at the age of thirty-six to abandon the examination career and devote himself to what he regarded as more serious studies. After some twenty years of labor he produced in 1783 a critical study of Sima Qian's *Shiji*, entitled 史記志疑 *Shiji zhiyi*, in thirty-six *juan*. A preface by Qian Daxin 錢大昕, dated 1787, lauds it as one of the most valuable studies that had been made of this history. First printed in 1787, the *Shiji zhiyi* was later included in the *Guangya congshu* 廣雅叢書. Liang Yusheng also made a study of a section in the *History of the Former Han Dynasty* (*Qian Hanshu* 前漢書), known as 古今人表 *Gujin renbiao*, which he brought together in 1786 under the title *Renbiao kao* (考), in nine *juan*. In the spring of 1788, he and Lu Wenchao 盧文弨 [1717–1796] together edited the 呂氏春秋 *Lüshi chunqiu* for Bi Yuan 畢沅. Having gathered further notes on that work, he later compiled the 呂子校補 *Lüzi jiaobu*, in two *juan*. In 1793 he completed a table of Chinese reign titles, 元號考 *Yuanhao kao*, in four *juan*, to which seven years later (1800) he appended a list of Japanese reign names. A short work in two *juan*, entitled 誌銘廣例 *Zhiming guangli*, "Styles and Patterns of Epigraphy," was completed in 1796. He had also seven *juan* of miscellaneous notes, entitled 瞥記 *Pieji*; and four *juan* of collected literary works, entitled 蛻稿 *Tuigao*.
>
> All these works, with the exception of the *Shiji zhiyi*, which was printed separately, were published together in 1811 under the title 清白士集 *Qingbaishi ji*. A further collection of Liang Yusheng's miscellaneous

CHAPTER 2

The Methods and Sources of an Eighteenth-Century Historian

In the opening lines of the preface to *A Journal of My Misgivings*, Liang Yusheng recounted how, when young, he read the *Shiji* at every opportunity and always felt a deep respect for Sima Qian's text. But because of the errors and omissions he encountered, he eventually put aside his youthful enthusiasm and admiration and replaced them with a close and comprehensive scrutiny.[1] The notes that record Liang's studies of the *Shiji*—found not only in *A Journal of My Misgivings*, but also scattered across his *Pieji* and the *Tingli jiwen* compiled by his sons—reveal that he subjected the text to a close examination. This type of examination was referred to in the literary Chinese of Liang's day as *jian* 檢 or *kao* 考, and attempted to identify "similarities and differences" (*tongyi* 同異) between the wording of the same passage in different editions, as well as with passages found elsewhere in the *Shiji*. Liang also turned to a variety of other sources: the texts that Sima Qian himself used as references; ancient inscriptions on stone and bronze; and other works, including commentaries and secondary studies, that quoted the Grand Historian's book. Liang Yusheng examined these variants in detail in order to determine which version contributed to the best historical account, even if that meant rewriting Sima Qian's original language. What Liang read and how he worked are the subjects of this chapter.

On the Practice of "Examining Differences"

The practice of scrutinizing something closely in order to discern what distinguishes it from something similar is deeply rooted in Chinese

[1] For Liang's preface, see chapter 1.

CHAPTER 3

The Founders of the Qin Ruling Lineage and Their Heirs

Liang Yusheng's critiques of Sima Qian's records of the lives and deeds of those who figured in Qin's rise are the focus of the next two chapters.[1] These individuals include Qin's rulers and their family members; the officials and generals who did their bidding; the ruling elite of competing states and those who filled the uppermost ranks of their governments and armies; and others who played roles—major or minor, for or against—in the story of Qin's relentless expansion, from peripheral state to empire.

In this chapter and the next, the organizing principle for presenting Liang's commentaries is the chronological succession of Qin's rulers. Their reigns are grouped according to the rubrics "Legendary Origins," "Early Rulers," "Rulers of the Middle Period," "the Kings of Qin," and "the First Emperor." There are gaps in the treatment of many of the rulers because Sima Qian—and hence, Liang Yusheng—had little to say about them and their reign periods. Nonetheless, the reign of each of Qin's rulers might be thought of as a segment in a stalk of bamboo, providing vital continuity to the plant, linking earlier stages in its growth to later ones.

[1] The people named and discussed in the main body of this chapter have been chosen because they played a significant role in Sima Qian's narrative of Qin's rise and their portrayals in the *Shiji* were commented upon by Liang Yusheng. There are, however, numerous individuals related to Qin's rise whose names appear in the *Shiji* in passages commented upon by Liang but are not included here. Many, especially the generals, are instead identified and discussed in chapter 6 since their significance has more to do with Qin's military campaigns than other aspects of the state's history. For several whose names appear in the present chapter and in chapter 6, what is said of them does not exhaust the contents of all of Liang's relevant notes. Table 3.2 (in the online supplement) provides a comprehensive list of all relevant individuals (more than 350 in total); identifies the *Shiji* passages in which they figure; and specifies which of Liang's notes should be consulted for further information.

CHAPTER 4

Kings and Emperors

This chapter is devoted to Liang Yusheng's critiques of *Shiji* passages recounting the lives of those active during the reigns of Qin's five kings and two emperors. In Sima Qian's narratives, this period of roughly 125 years appears crowded with prominent personalities, perhaps because his sources were richer and more detailed than those available for the earlier centuries of Qin history.

In view of what happened in the period following his death, Sir Shang turns out to have been the first in a line of powerful ministers (and then chancellors) who arrived from outside Qin to dominate the administration of the domain. Sima Qian's accounts of their lives are also the stories of Qin's triumphant unification, short-lived rule, and eventual collapse. Characteristics evident in Liang's commentaries on Sima Qian's records of earlier figures—his narrow focus, for example, and his emphasis on textual matters—are also present in his critiques of Sima Qian's accounts of Qin kings and emperors, their counselors and families, and their enemies.

Comprising one subset of the critiques discussed in this chapter are those that analyze the political discourses put into the mouths of advisors and counselors. Many of these figures rose to high positions in Qin and other domains, though in every case, their only qualification appears to have been their reputed eloquence and renown as exceptionally gifted "masters of disputation" 辨士. Because the speeches attributed to them were typically borrowed by Sima Qian from text now found in the *Zhanguo ce*—a source more associated with rhetorical arts than historical accuracy—Liang assumed they were, in fact, invented by other, perhaps later, "masters of disputation." Liang, as well as other commentators and critics, went to great pains to point out the speeches' many anachronisms and inconsistencies. For Liang, the hyperbole, distortion, and fanciful

CHAPTER 5

The Cultural and Administrative Geography of Qin

The geographical narrative of Qin's rise is obscure enough that doubts remain regarding the lineage's original homeland. Once Qin's domain was acknowledged by the Zhou king in the first decades of the ninth century BCE, its capital was established in southeastern Gansu. This area served as a base from which the Qin launched expeditions toward the east, pitting themselves against Rong tribes as well as tenants of the former landlords, the Zhou ruling elite. The progress of Qin's early expansion was marked by the shift of the Qin capital—and the burial grounds of its elite—to sites further and further east. Shrines dedicated to local spirits and eastern divinities, established mostly in the holy land of Yong 雍, symbolized Qin's hegemony in the west as well as its ambition to push against its eastern borders.

Construction of Qin's last and greatest capital started in 350 BCE at Xianyang, a site on the northern bank of the Wei River across from the present-day city of Xi'an. Xianyang became, in 221 BCE, the capital of the Qin empire, though it remained a work in progress until the end of the dynasty and beyond. In that same year, Qin accelerated its attempts to extend its administrative reforms by transforming what had been the kingdoms and fiefs of those the Qin defeated into commanderies and counties governed by professional administrators in the service of the empire. The First Emperor, perhaps to indicate that he felt secure in his control of even the outlying regions of his realm, went forth from his capital in 220 BCE on the first of five tours of inspection that took him west to the Gansu font of Qin power, south to the lands beyond the Yangzi River, east along the coastlines of what are now Jiangsu and Shandong, and north to borderlands that were still not completely pacified. These journeys also served as opportunities for the First Emperor to seek out, unsuccessfully, the elixirs

CHAPTER 6

Warfare

Sima Qian described the military rise of Qin, from the seventh century to the third century BCE, in the annals chapters devoted to the Qin ruling house and the First Emperor, as well as in the chronological tables that list the sequences of events in the various domains and kingdoms. He devoted somewhat longer and more detailed accounts of Qin's battles in the several hereditary houses chapters that are allocated to the state's foes and the more numerous memoirs that recount the lives of the generals, statesmen, and advisors who fashioned and executed Qin's strategy or struggled to resist Qin's advances.

Through the technique of comparative reading and collation of details, Liang pinpointed in individual *Shiji* passages Sima Qian's apparent mistakes with regard to such matters as chronology, the nature and scale of battles, where they happened, who fought them, the number of casualties, the names and titles of those in command, and the outcomes. He identified such errors most often in Sima Qian's accounts of Qin's conflicts with the large state of Jin—and its three "successor" states of Han, Wei, and Zhao—and, after that, in the descriptions of Qin's battles with Chu. This is due largely to the fact that Sima Qian wrote more about those battles than he did about Qin's conflicts with other adversaries. Thus, Liang has fewer critiques of what Sima Qian wrote about Qin's wars with the states of Qi and Yan that lay beyond Wei and Zhao. Liang also commented insightfully, if briefly, about what the *Shiji* says of Qin's conquest of Shu and Qin's role in the demise of the royal house of Zhou.

Early Battles with Jin

At first, Qin was occupied with subduing its immediate neighbors, the nomadic Rong 戎. Sire Mu (r. 659–621 BCE), at the beginning of his reign,

Liang Yusheng on *Shiji* Chronology

A major concern for Liang Yusheng in compiling his *Shiji zhiyi* was systematically identifying and correcting the many chronological errors in Sima Qian's text. Table A.1 (found in the online supplement) lists Liang's corrections as they relate to the history of the state of Qin. Many of Liang's critiques included in this table expose small errors—a discrepancy of a year or two between what the *Shiji* says and what Liang argued it should say—and correcting them involved little more than uncovering passages elsewhere in the *Shiji* or in other sources that provided dates that he judged more reliable. Other critiques reveal somewhat larger discrepancies or show that a chronological mistake is part of an interconnected series of textual errors that occur in a particular *Shiji* passage. Liang's attempts to correct mistakes of this sort involve more detailed and complicated arguments that address the larger questions of historicity in Sima Qian's narrative. These are summarized in the table's "notes" column and in its endnotes.

Liang's interest in chronology as reflected in *A Journal of My Misgivings* extended well beyond correcting faulty dates in the *Shiji*. He also explored questions relating to the calendars and other chronological documents used, for example, in the courts of antiquity to keep track of the succession within the ruling house. He would pursue this interest further in his somewhat later *Yuanhao lüe*.[1] With regard to *Shiji* passages that relate to the rise of Qin, Liang composed a series of related critiques on when the Qin first adopted the practice of starting the new year on the first day of the tenth month. Connected to this interest as well are Liang's somewhat more extended discussions, in the *Shiji zhiyi*, of Sima Qian's well-known errors in identifying the succession of kings and their reign lengths in

[1] See my discussion of the *Yuanhao lüe* in chap. 1 of the present volume.

EPILOGUE

Liang Yusheng and the *Shiji*

The fundamental building blocks of the chapters and appendixes in this book are the selected examples of how Liang Yusheng engaged in a critical reading of *Shiji* passages on Qin. These examples may also serve as illustrations of how his contemporaries approached early Chinese texts. Shorn of the explanations or elaborations added by modern commentators, Liang's work makes it clear that ancient documents—though remnants of the remote past and archaic in their language—were not fossils, inert and devoid of life, to those who studied them during the middle years of the Qing dynasty.

On the contrary, Liang appears to have regarded works such as the *Shiji* as material that needed work and could be improved. For that reason, he treated them as things that should be "carved" and "troweled" in order to render them as productive embodiments of the traditions to which they are the heirs. To use other language associated with Confucius, Liang did not simply transmit Sima Qian's ancient records, he "reanimated" them. For some, Liang's work represents an intervention—and a sometimes petty and misguided one at that—in texts whose origins and antiquity should make them inviolate. A reply to such criticism is found in Qian Daxin's preface to Liang's *Journal*: the *Shiji* that Liang examined was a diseased text that required Liang's ministrations to cure it of its maladies.

Liang went about doing his work on the *Shiji* line by line and word by word, identifying problems in the received text: errors of fact, fabrications, misstatements, internal contradictions and inconsistencies, as well as garbled passages and scribal mistakes. After studying a passage and comparing it with others that shared common wording, Liang proposed solutions that either solved the difficulties it posed or improved the understanding of its challenges. Whenever the evidence permitted it, Liang removed

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Index

Ai, King, of Wei (fictitious): invented by Sima Qian, 88n157, 207, 405n187, 472; as "present-day king," 468–70, 472, 469n17; retained by Du Yu, 468n13, 469n17, 470, 472n30; in "Wei Hereditary House," 405, 467; in "Zhang Yi Memoir," 473

Ai, Sire, of Qin, 150*table*, 176, 331, 388, 472n30; reign, 154n121. *See also* Bi, Sire, of Qin

altars and shrines: of Fu, 311, 312–13, 312n73, 313n77; Liang's notes, 366; of Mi, 318, 318nn104–105, 319; to the soil, 317–18; to sovereigns of the directions, 153, 153n118, 310–12, 318–19; for the treasure of Chen, 314; Wu Liang Shrine inscriptions, 231n141, 232; at Wuyang, 311, 313n77, 319, 319n106; at Yong, 157n133, 310–12, 311n71, 313, 313n77, 319, 329, 493

An Li, King, of Wei, 414, 414n226, 415, 470n20

ancient manuscripts, 132, 132n32, 244n200, 483–84, 485, 493. *See also* "Qin Chronicle" (Shuihudi); *Xinian* manuscript; *Zhao Zheng shu*

Anguo, Sir. *See* Xiao Wen, King, of Qin

Annals of Lü Buwei, See *Lüshi chunqiu*

Anterior Basilica, 322–23, 323n125, 324

anti-Qin sentiment, 58, 196, 203, 205, 280–81, 280n349, 286

Anyi, 190, 395–96, 395n142, 414, 415n227, 464

archaeological sites and surveys: Chencang, 314; Dabuzishan tombs, 168n178, 327–29, 327nn144–145, 330; Dog Hill of the West, 149n113, 302; Epang Palace, 324, 324nn128,130; Luantingshan, 312, 312n72; manuscript finds, 132, 132n32, 244n200; Maojiaping, 135n49; Mawangdui, 51, 204n25; and Qin origins, 298–99, 298–99n12, 304, 365; site of Altar of Mi, 318, 318n105; site of Pingyang, 306n49; site of Yongcheng, 307–8; surveys of tomb sites, 329–30, 333–35, 333n169; texts and maps from Fangmatan, 341n204, 383n89; and textual analysis, xi, 295, 366, 493–94; wooden board from Juyan, 316; Xianyang, 215n75, 320; Yinqueshan calendar, 485; Yueyang, 309. *See also* bronzes; "Qin Chronicle"; Qin tombs

assassins, memoirs of, 99–101, 263, 263n274, 293. *See also* Jing Ke

Ba (state), 201n16, 211

Bai Canal, 332, 332nn161–162

Bai Qi: burning of tombs of Chu kings, 455, 455n420; cruelty in battle, 431, 431n307; death of, 238n175, 431n307; errors on, in "Qin Annals," 417–18, 427; military campaigns, 236n166, 238, 314n220, 411n214, 412–14, 417, 421n258, 427, 454–55, 458n439; and Sima Cuo, 412–13, 415; titles held by, 209. *See also* "Bai Qi Memoir"

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