**Book Review**

**Bibliography**

[1] John Wills, The Mountain of Fame, Chapters 4 : Sima Qian, pp. 51-71.

[2] Li Feng, Early China, chapter 14 , “Ideological changes and their reflections in Han culture and Han art,” pp. 303-323.

**The purpose of these books**

John Wills’ The Mountain of Fame dedicates its different chapters to delicately introducing outstanding individuals whose roles in the formation of Chinese history are undeniable. The purpose of this book is believed to be highlighting the events and show the injustice and difficulties that occurred during the life of these individuals via an interesting tone that makes the book an overall joy to read. In addition, Li Feng’s Early China took a more critical approach to these events and provides a meticulous report of these occurrence.

**Summary of the main themes**

The Han dynasty undoubtedly provided one of the most influential periods of Chinese history, if not the most, as it was the stage for an abundance of historical events, which are considered by many as valuable life lessons in forms of spectacular tales. The role of Han dynasty in forming Chinese identity is so long-lived that “Han” is still used to describe the nationality, culture, ethnicity and background of current Chinese citizens. This essay discusses the tale of a great historian in Han times, Sima Qian, who passionately recorded the beginning chapter of Han history and whose innovations changed the way history was written even to this day. What made Sima Qian unique compared with other historians of his time was his approach to recording history. He did not consider this task as a means to obtain pure knowledge, but rather as a heir’s responsibility to his family of record keepers and a means to make a difference to the future.

The first emperor of the Han dynasty was Emperor Gao; a man with a rural background whose words and beliefs were humble and actions were rough yet courageous, though questionable at times. For instance, upon the abolition of the Qin dynasty, Emperor Gao was facing a great treat from his rival, Xiang Yu; the battle was described by Sima Qian to be full of fluctuations and confrontations. However, due to the their differences in dealing with their subordinates, with Emperor Gao keeping a humble tone and giving credit to his ministers and generals where credit was due, he was able to be victorious and accordingly, rose to power as the first emperor of a long-lasting dynasty.

Emperor Gao passed away soon after his last clash with Xiang Yu, leaving all the power to his widow, the Dowager Empress Lü, as his successor died at a young age. She had an influential role in the developments of the coming years and demonstrated one of the many examples of the Dowager Empresses’ significant influence in Han history. According to Sima Qian’s recordings, the condition of the Chinese society under the leadership of the Lü family was outstanding: decreased number of punishments and rate of crime as well as increased food and supplies. However, as most good things come to an end, the Chinese social and economical state at the the time was not maintain for long due to newly created monopolies of coin, salt, and iron as well as the northern threat of the Xiongnu.

After numerous year of corruption and rebel attacks, the situation seemed to improve with the rise of a fifteen year-old boy to power with the aid of her grandmother, Dowager Empress Dou; the boy was posthumously referred to as emperor Wu. Apart from the massive land expansions, Emperor Wu’s reign included significant changes to ceremonies and ideologies., Scholars from different parts of the land were tested to show their competence and accordingly, those who passed were appointed as officials. Initially, given the Daoist fashion of the Dou family’s lifestyle, which encouraged a minimalist approach to governing self as well as the people, the candidates who responded in with Legalist practices were discarded. To further clarify, natural events in Daoist view, or Huang-Lao practices to be more specific, are considered as uncertain and unpredictable while the Naturalist or Legalist view considers such events as scientific, comprehensible, and predictable. It is mentioned that many high ranking scholars at the time, including Sima tan who will be introduced later in this essay, along with Dowager Empress Dou studied and shared Huang-Lao beliefs. After the death of Dowager Empress Dou, this requirement was dismissed and therefore, many previously rejected Legalist scholars were appointed.

During his reign, Emperor Wu demonstrated his invested belief in the connections between the realms of heaven and earth; believing that signs of nature on earth told of events in heaven. This type of behavior can be observed in Emperor Wu’s regular declarations of new calendars. Many people at the time saw this as an opportunity to obtain fame and fortune; However, those whose fraudulence was discovered were punished or executed. Emperor Wu’s deepest desire was to perform the two great ceremonies “Feng” and “Shan” at mount Tai, as it was said that an Emperor would become immortal and ascend to heaven upon successfully performing these ceremonies; yet, his scholars were unable to find the correct ways to perform these ceremonies due to the long period from the last time they were performed. In 110 B.C.E, although the scholars had yet to find detailed information about the classical way of this performance, their research was stopped by Emperor Wu as he had set off to mount Tai to perform the ceremonies on his own terms.

At the time, Sima Qian’s father, Sima Tan, was a grand historian in the court of Emperor Wu and an active participant in the ceremonial changes during his reign. According to the author, it was likely that Sima Tan, similar to the scholars, also believed that there are not enough information to provide a detailed guide on the performance. Hence, he was excluded from attending, and even planning for these great ceremonies. After this exclusion, he was filled with sorrow and resentment, ultimately dying from what he considered as his life’s biggest failure. In his final moments, he shared his regrets with his son, Sima Qian, warning him about his concerns for the future: “I am fearful that the historical material will be neglected and lost”, and asking that Sima Qian, similar to himself, becomes a grand historian in the Emperor’s court. Sima Qian was able to fill out his father’s dying wish in 107 B.C.E.

The history recorded by Sima Qian judgment, at least explicitly, partially due to his own beliefs but mainly due to the harsh punishments from the emperors. His records provide insight to Han history in an intelligent structure, such that allows the readers to acknowledge different perspectives for similar events. Hence, there’s not a single chapter for an event and instead, different aspects of the event are mentioned in different sections of the recordings. He believed that by organizing the recordings in this way, future ministers and emperors would be encouraged to consider different aspects of the past events, which would significantly benefit their future decisions and hence, calming his father’s concerns regarding the future. His novel way of writing history has affected the ideologies of many scholars, even to this day.

Nevertheless, similar to many great men before him, Sima Qian’s fate was anything but pleasant. In 99 B.C.E, Li Ling, a great general in Emperor Wu’s army, was sent out to the north to lure the Xiongnu into Chinese territory in order for the reinforcements to abolish them by surprise. However, after the Xiongnu were informed of their plan by a traitor, Li Ling and his soldiers were captured. It was rumored that Li Ling has been teaching the Xiongnu army after his capture and therefore, his family was exterminated as a sign of emperor’s anger. However, Li Ling had not committed such act and it was Sima Qian who rose to his defense. Sadly, his claims only enraged the emperor, resulting in Sima Qian’s submission to the court and later being sentenced to castration, inches away from the capital punishment. Given the cultural situation of that time, the most honorable act in his situation would have been suicide, as committed by many imprisoned generals, ministers, and scholars before. He had commented on how men who took away their lives at these desperate times were not brave but rather confident that their hopes and dreams will never come true. For him, suicide would mean that he accepted the fact that he will never live up to his father’s expectations. Hence, it was Sima Qian’s promise to his father that restrained him from committing such an irreversible act; He submitted to castration, aiming to produce a version of history that merged the events of past and future, defining the boundaries between the realms of heaven and earth, and ultimately achieving his father’s hopes and dreams. Sima Qian was truly an outstanding figure, who stood by his beliefs and was punished for standing by what was right; a grand historian and a truly competent heir to his family’s legacy.

**Final notes**

Based on the author’s opinion, the history of Han is truly an inspiring tale of the good and the bad; the pure and the evil. The rise and the fall of various rulers, generals, ministers, and highly competent scholars can all be considered as significant lessons for anyone who cares to read and provide a train of thought to these tails. In addition, the author acknowledges and praises the astonishing influence of Sima Qian, one of the great grand historians of the Han dynasty, on recording Han history and the way history was recorded shown throughout different events of this period likewise. Lastly, regarding the mentioned bibliography, though providing a more in depth analysis, from the author’s perspective, Early China seems as a series of generic and rather bland descriptions tied together while John Will’s own joy and enthusiasm in his work is clearly noticeable from his words.

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