

## The Historian's Duty to Posterity

*Sima Qian's (145-87 BCE) Shiji, "Records of the Historian," was the first and in many ways the greatest of all attempts to record a comprehensive history of the Chinese past. Begun by his father, Sima Tan, the work was completed by Qian around 90 BCE, but not before he had been convicted of an insult to the emperor and sentenced to execution or castration. As in imperial Rome, those accused of lèse majesté would ordinarily be offered the option of suicide. In this letter to a friend, Sima Qian explains why he believes it was his duty to posterity and for the sake of his personal vindication to undergo the humiliation and pain of castration in order to survive and complete his history. It is difficult to think of a stronger testament to the importance of history and history writing in the Chinese tradition.*

### *[Letter to Ren Shaoqing (Ren An)]*

It is not easy to know the beginning and end of things. When I was young I had a spirit that would not be bridled, and as I grew older I won no fine praises in my village and district. But because of my father, our Ruler graciously allowed me to offer my poor talents and to come and go in the inner parts of the Palace. Therefore I cut off my acquaintanceship with friends and visitors and neglected the business of our family.

I considered then that a man who has a bowl over his head cannot hope to see the sky. Day and night I thought only how to use to the fullest my poor talents and strength. I went about the duties of my office with a single mind, seeking only the favor and love of our Ruler. But, quite contrary to my hopes, things came to a terrible misunderstanding.

[General] Li Ling and I both held office at the same time. Basically we were never very close. Our likes and dislikes lay in different directions; we never so much as drank a cup of wine together or shared the joys of intimate friendship. But I observed that he was clearly a man of superior ability. He was filial to his parents and trustworthy with his associates, honest in matters of money and just in all his giving and taking. In questions of precedence he would always yield; he was respectful and modest and gave way to others. His constant care was to sacrifice himself for his country, hastening in time without thought for his own safety. This was always in his mind, and I believed him to be truly one of the finest men of the nation. A subject who will go forth to face ten thousand deaths, giving not the slightest thought for his own life but hurrying only to the rescue of his lord—such a man is rare indeed! Now he has committed one act that was not right, and the officials who think only to save themselves and protect their own wives and children vie with each other in magnifying his shortcomings. Truly it makes me sick at heart!

The infantry that Li Ling commanded did not come up to five thousand. They marched deep into barbarian territory, strode up to the ruler's court and dangled the bait, as it were, right before the tiger's jaws. In fearless ranks they shouted a challenge to the powerful barbarians, gazing up at their numberless hosts. For over ten days they continued on combat with the Shanyü. The enemy fell in disproportionate numbers; those who tried to rescue their dead and wounded could not even save themselves. The barbarian lords in their robes of felt trembled with fear. They summoned their Wise Kings of the Left and Right and called out all the men who could use a bow. The whole nation descended together upon our men and surrounded them. They fought their way along for a thousand miles until their arrows were all gone and the road was blocked. The relief forces did not come, and our dead and

injured lay heaped up. But Li Ling with one cry gave courage to his army, so that every man raised himself up and wept. Washed in blood and choked with tears, they stretched out their empty bows and warded off the bare blades of the foe. North again they turned and fought to the death with the enemy.

Before Li Ling fell into the hands of the enemy, a messenger came with the report [of his attack] and the lords and ministers of the Han all raised their cups in joyous toast to the Emperor. But after a few days came word of his defeat, and because of it the Emperor could find no favor in his food and no delight in the deliberations of the court. The great officials were in anxiety and fear and did not know what to do. Observing His Majesty's grief and distress, I dared to forget my mean and lowly position, sincerely desiring to do what I could in my fervent ignorance. I considered that Li Ling had always shared with his officers and men their hardships and want, and could command the loyalty of his troops in the face of death. In this he was unsurpassed even by the famous generals of old. And although he had fallen into captivity, I perceived that his intention was to try to seek some future opportunity to repay his debt to the Han. Though in the end he found himself in an impossible situation, yet the merit he had achieved in defeating and destroying so many of the enemy was still worthy to be proclaimed throughout the world. This is what I had in my mind to say, but I could find no opportunity to express it. Then it happened that I was summoned into council, and I took the chance to speak of Li Ling's merits in this way, hoping to broaden His Majesty's view and put a stop to the angry words of the other officials.

But I could not make myself fully understood. Our enlightened Ruler did not wholly perceive my meaning but supposed that I was trying to disparage the Ershi General (Li Guangli, brother of Emperor Wu's favorite concubine) and plead a special case for Li Ling. So I was put into prison, and I was never able to make clear my fervent loyalty. Because it was believed that I had tried to defame the Emperor, I was finally forced to submit to the judgment of the law officials. My family was poor and lacked sufficient funds to buy commutation of the sentence. Of my friends and associates, not one would save me; among those near the Emperor no one said so much as a word for me. My body is not made of wood or stone, yet alone I had to face the officials of the law. Hidden in the depths of prison, to whom could I plead my case? This, Shaoqing, is something you must truly have seen for yourself. Was this not the way I always acted? Li Ling had already surrendered alive and destroyed the fine reputation of his family. And then I was thrown into the "silkworm chamber" [where castrations were performed]. Together we became a sight for all the world to laugh at in scorn. Alas, alas! Matters such as these it is not easy to explain in detail to ordinary people.

My father had no great deeds that entitled him to receive the split tallies or the red charter [tokens of special privileges] from the Emperor. He dealt with affairs of astronomy and the calendar, which are close to divination and worship of the spirits. He was kept for the sport and amusement of the Emperor, treated the same as the musicians and jesters, and made light of by the vulgar men of his day. If I fell before the law and were executed, it would make no more difference to most people than one hair off nine oxen, for I was nothing but a mere ant to them. The world would not rank me among those men who were able to die for their ideals, but would believe simply that my wisdom was exhausted and my crime great, that I had been unable to escape penalty and in the end had gone to my death. Why? Because all my past actions had brought this on me, they would say.

A man has only one death. That death may be as weighty as Mount Tai, or it may be as light as a goose feather. It all depends upon the way he uses it. Above all, a man must bring no shame to his forbears. Next he must not shame his person, nor be shameful in his countenance, nor in his words." . . .

It is the nature of every man to love life and hate death, to think of his relatives and look after his wife and children. Only when a man is moved by higher principles is this not so. Then there are things which he must do. Now I have been most unfortunate, for I lost my parents very early. With no brothers or sisters or close relations, I have been left alone, an orphan. And you yourself, Shaoqing, have seen me with my wife and child, and you know how things are. Yet the brave man does not necessarily die for honor, while even the coward may fulfill his duty. Each takes a different way to exert himself. Though I might be weak and cowardly and seek shamelessly to prolong my life, yet I know full well the difference between what ought to be followed and what rejected. How could I bring myself to sink into the shame of ropes and bonds? If even the lowest slave and scullion maid can bear to commit suicide, why should not one like myself be able to do what has to be done? But the reason I have not refused to bear these ills and have continued to live, dwelling in vileness and disgrace without taking my leave, is that I grieve that I have things in my heart which I have not been able to express fully, and I am shamed to think that after I am gone my writings will not be known to posterity.

Too numerous to record are the men of ancient times who were rich and noble and whose names have yet vanished away. It is only those who were masterful and sure, the truly extraordinary men, who are still remembered. When the Earl of the West was imprisoned at Youli, he expanded the *Changes*; Confucius was in distress when he made the *Spring and Autumn*; Qu Yuan was banished and he composed his poem "Encountering Sorrow"; after Zuo Qiu lost his sight, he composed the *Narratives of the States*; when Sunzi had had his feet amputated, he set forth the *Art of War*; Lü Buwei was banished to Shu, but his *Lülan* (*Lüshi Chunqiu*) has been handed down through the ages; while Han Feizi was held prisoner in Qin, he wrote "The Difficulties of Disputation" and "The Sorrow of Standing Alone"; most of the three hundred poems of the *Book of Odes* were written when the sages poured forth their anger and dissatisfaction. All these men had a rankling in their hearts, for they were not able to accomplish what they wished. Therefore they wrote about past affairs in order to pass on their thoughts to future generations. Those like Zuo Qiu, who was blind, or Sunzi, who had no feet, could never hold office, so they retired to compose books in order to set forth their thoughts and indignation, handing down their theoretical writings in order to show to posterity who they were.

I too have ventured not to be modest but have entrusted myself to my useless writings. I have gathered up and brought together the old traditions of the world which were scattered and lost. I have examined the deeds and events of the past and investigated the principles behind their success and failure, their rise and decay, in one hundred and thirty chapters. I wished to examine into all that concerns heaven and man, to penetrate the changes of the past and present, completing all as the work of one family. But before I had finished my rough manuscript, I met with this calamity. It is because I regretted that it had not been completed that I submitted to the extreme penalty without rancor. When I have truly completed this work, I shall deposit it in some safe place. If it may be handed down to men who will appreciate it, and penetrate to the villages and great cities, then though I should suffer a thousand mutilations, what regret should I have? Such matters as these may be discussed with a wise man, but it is difficult to explain them to ordinary people.

It is not easy to dwell in poverty and lowliness while base men multiply their slanderous counsels. I met this misfortune because of the words I spoke. I have brought upon myself the scorn and mockery even of my native village and I have soiled and shamed my father's name. With what face can I again ascend

and stand before the grave mound of my father and mother? Though a hundred generations pass, my defilement will only become greater. This is the thought that wrenches my bowels nine times each day. Sitting at home, I am befuddled as though I had lost something. I go out, and then realize that I do not know where I am going. Each time I think of this shame, the sweat pours from my back and soaks my robe. I am now no more than a servant in the harem. How could I leave of my own accord and hide away in some mountain cave? Therefore I follow along with the vulgar, floating and sinking, bobbing up and down with the times, sharing their delusions and madness.

Now you, Shaoqing, have advised me to recommend worthy men and promote scholars. But would not such a course be at odds with my own intent? Now although I should try to add glory and fame to myself, or with fine words seek to excuse my error, it would have no effect upon the vulgar. I would not be believed, but would only take upon myself further shame. Only after the day of death shall right and wrong at last be determined.

[translated by Burton Watson, 1958]