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SIMA QIAN

HISTORICAL RECORDS

A new translation by Raymond Dawson

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Historical Records

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by

RAYMOND DAWSON

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INTRODUCTION

Historical Records (*Shiji*) is the most famous Chinese historical work, which not only established a pattern for later Chinese historical writing, but was also much admired for its literary qualities, not only in China, but also in Japan, where it became available as early as the eighth century AD.

What makes it particularly remarkable to the modern eye is the complexity of its construction. It is not a mere narrative history. There are five sections: first come the basic annals, then the chronological tables, then treatises concerning the history of matters considered to be of importance to the state, then histories of states which existed prior to the unification of China, and finally a section which is largely biographical. The whole massive work, in 130 chapters, is meant to contain a history of the Chinese world from the beginning down to about 100 BC, the time when it was being written.

The size of the work, together with its complicated structure, present a difficulty for anyone wishing to provide a sample for readers of the World's Classics. Consequently I have decided to restrict this selection to material relevant to the Qin Dynasty and its founder. This has several advantages: the dynasty was short-lived, lasting less than two decades altogether; it was the dynasty that unified China in 221 BC and founded the Empire that, despite long periods of division and of domination by alien peoples, was to survive until its replacement by a republic after the revolution of 1911. Happily too, it is a period that is less unfamiliar than some to English-speaking readers, especially since it was founded by the emperor known to history as Qin Shi Huangdi (First Emperor of Qin), whose tomb near Xi'an was guarded by the so-called 'terracotta warriors' which were unearthed in 1974 and are now one of China's main tourist attractions.

The word Qin is perhaps better known to many readers in the romanization 'Ch'in', which was widely current until recent times. It is thought to have been the word that lay behind the modern names for that part of the world such as 'China'

and 'la Chine', while the term 'Sinology', meaning Chinese studies, must also have derived from the same origin. But although the Qin Dynasty was responsible for unifying China and laying the foundations of empire, the Chinese people have not looked back on this age with pride, and so have not adopted it for the name of their country, which has throughout the imperial period, and indeed since, been known as 'the Middle Kingdom'. Indeed, when they have wished to adopt for themselves names derived from dynastic periods, they have fastened on revered dynasties like Han and Tang, and sometimes referred to themselves as 'men of Han' or 'men of Tang'.

The reason for their unwillingness to call themselves men of Qin is plain enough. The Qin were notorious for several episodes which made them synonymous with tyranny in the eyes of their successors. The unification of China was a task that could be achieved only by the deployment of extreme ruthlessness. One event that has stood out among all others as the target of vilification is the so-called 'burning of the books' in 213 BC. The purpose of this destruction of literature was to monopolize learning for the benefit of the court by causing sensitive material to be available only to the seventy court academicians (or, more literally, scholars of broad learning), leaving only works of practical value at the disposal of a wider readership. This was the most notorious of the literary inquisitions that have disfigured Chinese history, and it was made more serious by the conflagration at the end of this short-lived dynasty, for it seems to have destroyed much of what had survived in the imperial library. We are, of course, not in a position to know how effective this measure was (although much was made of the attempts to rediscover and reconstitute ancient works in the succeeding Han Dynasty), but the episode obviously provided rich material for anti-Qin propagandists in later decades and centuries, so that ultimately Qin darkness and barbarism came to be directly contrasted with Confucian light and civilization.

A second enterprise with which the name of Qin is indissolubly associated is the building of the Great Wall. So much had been achieved during the First Emperor's reign, since all the great powers had fallen to his armies in the last decade

prior to unification, that the supreme task of his period as emperor was clearly to consolidate these gains. Although he might claim that the Qin Dynasty would last for 10,000 reigns, he had to do as much as he could to preserve his conquests. It is a cliché that the Great Wall is the only man-made object that can be seen from the moon. It is also one of the main tourist sights of contemporary China, and all kinds of distinguished visitors have been filmed thereon by the world's television cameras. But what is to be seen nowadays near Beijing is the reconstruction made during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), which succeeded the Yuan Dynasty of the alien Mongols and was deeply concerned to put up barriers against any resurgence of Mongol power.

The actual extent of the original Qin building operations is far from clear. The northern states had already erected defensive barriers on their frontiers to keep out the barbarians, and the Qin were driven by the relentless logic of the situation to link these up and try to form a material demarcation between the sedentary Chinese, who were dependent on the raising of crops, and the nomadic non-Chinese people of the north, who were prone to find easy pickings by raiding the fat lands to their south. The logistics of wall-building over such terrain are frightening, so it is not surprising that vast numbers of convict-labourers were employed upon this task and that the death rate was extremely high. At the same time a force of 700,000 convict-labourers was being employed on the construction of the imperial tomb; and the discovery of the 'terracotta warriors', more than 7,000 individually represented soldiers, together with their horses and chariots—part of the force deployed to defend the magnificent tomb, whose description in the *Historical Records* still awaits verification—lends credence to the idea that a vast amount of resources and skill was invested in this endeavour. At any rate, to the resentment of the intellectuals at the burning of the books was added the resentment of the labouring masses at the enormous physical burdens placed upon the people by such great construction enterprises as the Great Wall and the imperial tomb.

Another category of people who suffered hugely from the Qin success was the leading families of the various independ-

ent states that had until recently comprised China. If the records are to be believed 200,000 of these people were removed from their localities and housed near the capital, presumably together with their families and household servants, so that the Qin could keep a close eye on them.

So, lasting as it did for less than two decades, the Qin left behind a legacy that was bound to receive extremely hostile attention in the writings of future historians. The Qin's place in history is reminiscent of that of the short-lived Sui Dynasty, which reunified China before the glorious Tang took over early in the seventh century AD. Although the Sui emperors had appreciated the propaganda value of utilizing the support of all the main schools of thought, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, they nevertheless suffered from a similar urge to get things done in too much of a hurry and their tyrannical methods could be made much of by Confucian historians now fully imbued with the doctrine of the bad last ruler who had forfeited the Mandate of Heaven as a result of his wickedness, while writers of popular fiction could regale their readers with bizarre reports of the sexual prowess and inclinations of the Emperor Yang, who was said to have progressed down the newly constructed canals in an ornate barge pulled by his concubines, and to have had a great city built to house his harem rather than for geopolitical reasons.

It is plain therefore that the Qin Dynasty has suffered from a bad press throughout most of Chinese history, although there was a brief period during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution when, in association with the anti-Confucius campaign, the more positive aspects of the Qin achievement were emphasized. Is it then possible to get at the reality behind the propaganda? Apart from the major tyrannical enterprises which have just been mentioned—the construction of the tomb, the building of the Great Wall, and the settling of huge numbers of potential dissidents in the environs of the capital—the sources assume that the evil of Qin was very much due to its being a Legalist regime.

The Legalist philosophy had its origin in Qin under the auspices of Lord Shang, a minister originally from the state of Wey whose doctrines are allegedly set out in the *Book of Lord*

Shang, the first of two major Legalist works. The philosophy contained in this book lays much stress on the kind of militaristic values that one might expect an ambitious dictator to hold. It also stresses agriculture as compared to other economic activities. There is emphasis on the doctrine of mutual responsibility to ensure that families and communities police themselves for fear that all would suffer punishment for any crime committed by a member of the group. Ethical and old-fashioned cultural values are attacked, and the relentless rule of law is meant to prevail over Confucian casuistry and family values.

But it is important to realize that the slate was not wiped clean of earlier tradition. Obviously, Legalist ideas did have an impact and did assist the Qin in the ruthless and efficient pursuit of their goals, but it is not in the nature of human affairs for the past to be completely wiped out. Even in a modern society, with all the tools of propaganda at its disposal and a relentless desire to change the very nature of human motivation, it is amazing how resilient old-fashioned beliefs and practices can be; so that with a slight relaxation in contemporary China out from the cupboard came the ancestral tablets and joss-sticks burnt again in the temples. The Qin Dynasty lasted for such a short time that the philosophy of Legalism cannot have had as profound an impact as is sometimes assumed.

A reading of the *Historical Records* does reveal some Legalist influence, but at the same time it is interesting how the Legalist message, even in the mouth of someone like Zhao Gao, the eunuch who was the power behind the throne at the end of the dynasty, is depicted as following the time-honoured practice of quoting from ancient literary sources and models from antiquity. The author of the *Historical Records* was naturally incapable of depicting dyed-in-the-wool Legalist villains, however much Legalism may have been blamed for Qin villainy. One is struck, too, by the wording of the inscriptions on tablets erected throughout the Empire as the First Emperor went on his travels. As may be seen from a reading of 'The Annals of Qin' (Chapter 5) these are full of the grandiose language one would expect from the scribes of a supreme

monarch traversing his vast new empire, and the Legalist influence is not very conspicuous.

Of course, it must be recognized that the *Historical Records* is not concerned with the business of history-writing as we know it today. It has much to do with the outline of political and military events and the deeds of great men, and little to do with grand modern conceptions like causation. To get a clearer idea of what life was like at the grass roots one needs more information from the vast treasure trove of archaeological discovery which has emerged under the People's Republic of China. For example, in 1975 a handbook of Qin law was discovered in the grave of an official who in 235 BC was charged with the business of trying criminal cases. Although the law described was clearly operative in the state of Qin some years before the unification and establishment of the Empire in 221 BC, it is reasonable to assume that much of it would have been put into use under the Qin Dynasty. Two points are particularly striking: one is the great detail and sophistication of the legal procedures, and the other is that the system described, although harsh by present-day European standards, does not portray Qin society as distinctively so in comparison with other Chinese societies of antiquity. In fact, from some points of view the Qin may be seen as a stage in the increasing centralization and bureaucratization of China, exposed to vilification because it trod on many toes in its rush to create something lasting and inevitable. It should also be remembered that, although scholars nowadays tend to think that sophisticated systems of law were in earlier and wider operation than was at once thought, Confucian anti-Legalism has tended to mask this fact.

In order to set the Qin Dynasty in its historical context it is necessary to look at ancient Chinese history through a wider-angled lens. The preceding dynasty, the Zhou, had been established at some time during the eleventh century BC, with its chief city in the area of Xianyang (present-day Xi'an), where the Qin Dynasty was eventually to have its capital. It seems to have exercised hegemony over a loose confederation of northern Chinese states which had assisted in overcoming the previous dynasty, the Yin (or Shang). The extent and strength of

its control was traditionally emphasized in China and its sphere of influence was even supposed to have included the state of Chu in the Yangtze valley, which in fact had a very different culture and for a long time was the chief enemy as far as the northern Chinese states were concerned. Modern scholars have various opinions as to the extent of Zhou control and influence, but what is quite clear is that before long the subordinate states began to demonstrate their independence from Zhou and to absorb their smaller neighbours. In the seventh century BC there was a league of northern Chinese states, which was first of all under the hegemony of the state of Qi in the north-east and secondly under the hegemony of Jin, which was situated in the great bend of the Yellow River where the modern province of Shanxi is to be found. The ostensible purpose of this league was to support the now small and enfeebled Zhou regime, but in reality the confederates were concerned to settle disputes among their members and offer united opposition to the growing power of Chu in the south.

By this time the Zhou capital had had to be moved to the area of present-day Luoyang; and it is also during the seventh century BC that the state of Qin first came to prominence on the Chinese stage. Being far away from the ancient centres of Confucianism in Lu and Qi in north-eastern China and having later spawned the hated Legalist philosophy, it tended to have a semi-barbarian image in ancient China, but it did occupy territory which had constituted the heartlands of the original Zhou regime. At the same time it is assumed that the Qin regime was militarily hardened by its proximity to the barbarian people of Ba and Shu in present-day Sichuan, which it eventually seized from Chu in the late fourth century BC.

For the last one and a half centuries of the so-called Zhou Dynasty China went through what is termed the Warring States period, a time of conflict between the handful of major states which had survived from the internecine struggles of the preceding centuries. The rulers of these states began to usurp the title of king (*wang*), which had belonged, for example, to Kings Wen and Wu, who had laid the foundations for the revered Zhou Dynasty. Philosophical writings revealed a nos-

talgia for the golden age of the early Zhou Dynasty and a feeling that society was waiting for a restoration of rule over 'all under Heaven'. It was argued that the world would flock to any ruler who governed his state benevolently. But it was of course the force of arms which brought victory and, despite attempts to forge alliances that would thwart the menace of Qin, in fact the major states fell one after another in quick succession, the six most powerful all being conquered in the decade before the final unification. The destruction of the Zhou reigning house had in fact already taken place in 256 BC, but by this time its obliteration was of symbolical rather than practical significance.

Although the political changes dating from the period preceding the Qin Dynasty can easily be outlined, it is not so easy to document changes in the fabric of Chinese society. It is clear that new methods of centralized administration had developed as the states grew larger, particularly stimulated by the need to administer conquered territories. Social change inevitably followed these changes in political organization, with aristocratic predominance gradually giving way to the kind of meritocratic tendency that was to be the norm in imperial China. It is obvious too that technological changes had fostered a development in warfare from the old-fashioned system in which chariot-borne aristocrats were at the centre of events to what was more like mass warfare using iron rather than bronze weapons. Plainly also there had been a gradual development from a barter economy to a money economy, land was being bought and sold, and, despite Confucian contempt for the merchant class, these people were increasingly beginning to wield power.

In fact the merchant Lü Buwei even became Chief Minister of Qin in the year 250 BC, a most extraordinary achievement for someone who had made his fortune in this way: such a success was never surpassed in later centuries by people of this class. What can less confidently be put down to his credit is the claim that he was the natural father of the First Emperor of Qin, who was born in 259 BC and came to the throne of Qin in 246 BC, reigning as king over the state until he unified China twenty-five years later. This story found its way into the

Historical Records along with other improbable anecdotal material which infiltrated into the account either through the unsurprising gullibility of its author or through insertion by later malicious hands. When he reached adulthood in 238 BC he began to wield power, but in 210 BC, while still only in his fiftieth year, he died suddenly while on tour. In the circumstances no true account of his life survives; instead we have a collection of stories of the kind one would expect to be associated with tyrants.

Sima Qian, the author of the *Historical Records*, took an exuberant interest in good stories and would certainly not have felt the need to submit his material to the kind of scrutiny that would have worried the conscience of a modern historian. The ancient Chinese historical style was in any case to preserve traditions rather than to get at the truth. Sima Qian's object was, as he said himself, to place on record the achievements of great men. It is to be seen in the context of a society in which filial piety was of great importance, and one of the supreme duties of filial piety was to conduct oneself in such a way that an account of one's deeds would be handed down to later generations and thus bring credit to one's ancestors.

In talking about the Chinese historical tradition one has to be very careful to qualify this term. The development of a distinct body of literature separately recognized as history was only a very gradual process. The pre-Qin writings which we categorize as history consisted of works that had a very different aim from that of the modern historian. In remote antiquity rulers needed to have in their entourage people who could place on record and preserve oracular responses concerning important state events and people who were expert at elucidating the links between natural phenomena and human events. It is clear too that at an early stage the text of interstate agreements would have had to be placed on record. The recording of all these kinds of material would inevitably have led to the production of crude annals. One of the most puzzling phenomena in the study of ancient China is the fact that Confucius's greatest claim to fame was his edition of the annals of his native state of Lu. The theory was that the wording of this dry chronicle was so adjusted as to secretly

confer praise or blame on the participants in historical events, but a careful analysis of the contents rules out the possibility of such an interpretation. Various 'traditions' explained the wording of the Lu annals, and three of these have survived. One of them, the *Zuo Tradition*, was mixed up at an early stage with a narrative account of the history of the northern states. Again this latter work could not be described as history in anything like the modern sense, but rather as a collection of anecdotes, and it has as much to do with the origins of literature in story-telling as with the origins of history. There is also an ancient work called the *Shu Jing*, or *Book of Documents*, which in the Han period became one of the hallowed Classics, but it is a work of uncertain date with later accretions constituting about half the book as it now exists. It purports to consist of material such as speeches made by ancient rulers and their ministers and is in the nature of historical source material rather than history. At the same time it should be remembered that anecdotes about ancient rulers and ministers often provided material to support the arguments of those whom we have tended to classify as philosophers.

Sima Qian did not see himself as heir to a distinctive history-writing tradition. His final chapter is autobiographical and tells how he came to write the *Historical Records*. It was his father, Sima Tan, who had conceived the idea and who, in a moving deathbed scene, urged his son to complete the work. Sima Tan looked upon it as the hereditary task of the family to produce such a compilation since they had been Grand Astrologers even in ancient times. By now the task had expanded from the compilation of a dry annalistic account to the story of the Chinese world from the beginning right down to their own times in the reign of the famous Emperor Wu of the Former Han Dynasty. The word *shi*, as an analysis of the Yin Dynasty character indicates, apparently used to refer to the official whose task was to record hits in archery contests and later developed responsibility for the recording of astronomical events, the results of divination, and other matters of importance to the rulers of states. Eventually it began to merit

the translation of 'historian', a construction which it has continued to bear down to the present day. I have therefore followed the tradition in referring to the book compiled by Sima Qian as the *Historical Records* as well as the practice of referring to the author as the Grand Historiographer where appropriate in the translation, although it has to be remembered that the title would not have merited such a translation when held by the Sima's ancestors in the Zhou Dynasty. It must also be appreciated that both Sima Qian and his father were not officially employed as historians, as came to be the case with those who were employed by the state to compile dynastic histories.

As I have said, Sima Qian did not see himself as the heir to a tradition of history-writing in anything like a modern sense of the term. Rather he saw himself as a preserver of tradition about great men, as his autobiographical chapter shows. Given the lack of precedent, the most extraordinary thing about the *Historical Records* is its structure. Sima Qian did not content himself with a mere narrative history. He had an understanding of the complexities of history-writing. He divided the work into five sections. First of all there were the basic annals, and indeed our translation includes the main part of chapter 6, which consists of the Basic Annals of the First Emperor of Qin. Secondly there were the chronological tables which skilfully assembled and set out the important political events of the period covered by the book. Thirdly came the treatises, the purpose of which was to deal in turn with the history of some of the matters of particular importance in the eyes of the Government, such as the calendar, the waterways, state religious practices, and so on. Unfortunately this section of the book is clearly in a less complete form than the rest of the work, but it sets a valuable example followed by the writers of the later dynastic histories. Fourthly comes the section known as the Hereditary Houses, which mainly deals with the history of the feudal states that existed before the Qin unified China, and finally comes a section entitled *lie zhuan*—using the same word *zhuan* as is employed in the *Zuozhuan*, or *Zuo Tradition*—meaning 'arranged traditions'. The content of this last but longest section is mainly biographies of

famous men of the ages concerned, but it also includes collective biographies (as, for example, those that deal with the 'harsh officials' or the 'wandering knights') together with accounts of the history of foreign peoples with whom the Chinese came into contact.

The second great achievement of the *Historical Records* is the vividness of the writing. It must be remembered that, although he apparently felt that it was his duty in filling his hereditary post to compile such a work, Sima Qian was not under any obligation to do so. It is difficult to decide exactly how much material he obtained from written sources, but clearly much of the liveliness must have come from the strong oral traditions of the day. In adapting the archaic language of the *Zuo Tradition* for some of his chapters in the Hereditary Houses section he showed great skill in making the material accessible to contemporary audiences, but in the final section his love of a good story is given free rein, and at the same time he sees and demonstrates with his final summing-up on each person that the 'innumerable biographies' of which he can only give a sample is the essence of history.

With his sophisticated approach to the writing of history in separate sections, Sima Qian set a pattern which was followed in the dynastic histories, but these were compiled by bureaucrats as reference works for the use of other bureaucrats so they were bound to lack the vividness of Sima Qian's composition. On the other hand, in order to do justice to the great tradition of Chinese historiography, it must be pointed out that total sterility did not set in and there were many other interesting and original developments. However, in order to attempt to provide the non-specialist reader with an illustration of this seminal work I have, as I indicated earlier, provided some translations of chapters which are concerned with the Qin Dynasty and its founder.

But before I do so I shall attempt to assist an understanding of why Sima Qian embarked on this great work by providing an extract from the autobiographical postface to the *Historical Records*. This chapter starts with an account of the history of the Sima family going back to remote antiquity and has little about Sima's father, Sima Tan, except the complete text

of a discussion from his pen on the important points of the Six Schools (the Yin-Yang school, the Confucians, the Mohists, the School of Names, the Legalists, and the Daoists). Then it goes on as follows:

Since the Grand Historiographer had been in charge of astronomy, he did not administer the people. He had a son called Qian. Qian was born at Longmen. He ploughed and kept flocks on the sunny slopes of the mountains near the Yellow River. By the age of 10 he was reading aloud the ancient writings. At twenty he journeyed south to the Yangtze and Huai Rivers, ascended Kuaiji to search for the cave of Yu, espied Jiuyi, went by water down to Yun and Xiang, journeyed north and crossed the Wen and Si to investigate the traditions in the cities of Qi and Lu, and observed the customs handed down by Master Kong, and took part in the archery competition held at Mount Yi in Cou. He suffered distress in Po, Xie, and Pengcheng, and returned home via Liang and Chu. Afterwards Qian served as a palace gentleman, and received orders to be sent on the western expedition to the south of Ba and Shu. Having gone south and captured Qiong, Ze, and Kunming, they returned and made their report on the mission.

In that year the Son of Heaven inaugurated the *feng* sacrifice of the Han house, but the Grand Historiographer was left behind at Zhounan and could not join in the activities. Consequently he became so exasperated that he was about to die. It so happened that his son Qian was returning from the mission and saw his father somewhere between the Yellow and Luo Rivers. The Grand Historiographer grasped Qian's hand. 'Our forebears were Grand Historians of the Zhou house,' he said with tears in his eyes. 'From highest antiquity they achieved distinction and honour in the times of Shun and the Xia Dynasty, being in charge of astronomical matters. In later generations they went into decline, and will the chain be severed by me? When you in your turn become Grand Historian, you will carry on from our ancestors. At this moment the Son of Heaven, receiving a thread which has been handed on for 1,000 years, is performing the *feng* sacrifice at Mount Tai, and I cannot go along too. This is my fate, is it not! When I die, you are bound to become the Grand Historian; and having become Grand Historian, do not forget what I intended to argue and put down in writing. Moreover filial piety starts in the service of parents, is next to be found in the service of rulers, and finally in the establishment of one's own character. For the most important aspect of filial piety is for your name to be spread abroad in later generations in order to bring glory to your father and

mother. Now all under Heaven sang the praises of the Duke of Zhou, saying that he was able to discuss and sing the virtues of Wen and Wu, proclaim the odes of Zhou and Shao, make known the thoughts of King Tai and Wang Ji, going as far back as Gong Liu, so as to pay honour to Hou Ji.

'After Yu and Lei the kingly ways became defective and the rites and music declined, but Master Kong repaired the old and restored what had been discarded, and when he discussed the *Songs* and *Documents* and created the *Spring and Autumn*, men of learning right down to the present have taken him as their model. Since the capture of the unicorn more than 400 years have elapsed and, since some of the states have annexed others, historical records have been abandoned and cut off. Now the Han has risen up and all within the seas is united and, although I became Grand Historian, I have not discussed and placed on record the enlightened sovereigns, talented rulers, loyal ministers and public servants who would die from a sense of duty. I am extremely fearful that the historical writings of all under Heaven will be discarded, and you should really let your thoughts dwell on this!' 'Although your young son is not intelligent,' said Qian, bowing his head and weeping, 'he begs to discuss everything which our forebears have reported concerning ancient times. He will not dare to leave any gaps in it.'

A little later in this autobiographical postface we find the following:

The Grand Historiographer remarked: 'My father had a saying: "Five hundred years from the death of the Duke of Zhou there was Master Kong. From the death of Master Kong right up to now it is 500 years. There is the ability to persevere with the work of the far-sighted generations, to rectify the tradition of the *Book of Changes*, to continue the *Spring and Autumn*, to base oneself on a world defined by the *Songs*, *Documents*, *Rites* and *Music*." His thoughts were set upon these things! His thoughts were set upon these things! How dare his son draw back from them?'

So we are lucky enough to possess Sima Qian's own words, explaining his reason for undertaking this mammoth task. He was much moved by the desire to perpetuate the glories of the past, and he also accepted his father's vision that the Simas were in the Mencian tradition that a sage was due every 500 years, the time which had elapsed since Confucius's day. More than 2,000 years after his death his vision and determination still shine through.