

THE COURT SCRIBE'S *EIKON PSYCHES*  
A NOTE ON SIMA QIAN AND HIS LETTER TO REN AN<sup>1</sup>

Bernhard FUEHRER

East Asia Department, School of Oriental and African Studies  
University of London, Thornhaugh Street/Russell Square  
London WC1H 0XG, England

The aim of this study is to analyse the literary rhetoric connected with the letter of Sima Qian to Ren An, its connection with epistolary and other traditions of antiquity and the later critical evaluation through history.

Sima Qian (c. 145 – c. 86 B.C.) is well known as “astrologer”, “astronomer”, “historian”, or “scribe” at the court of Liu Che (156–87 B.C.), Han Wudi (r. 141–87 B.C.). Inheriting his father's, Sima Tan's (d. 110 B.C.), position at the imperial court, he followed a family tradition which he knew traced back more than two millennia to the times of the legendary ruler Zhuanxu.<sup>2</sup> Due to his full access to the historical source material and documents, local histories and philosophical treatises collected in the court archives and the imperial library he was able to continue his father's historical enterprise. The *summa* of these insights known today as *Shiji* or *Records of the Court Scribe* is an impressive ex-

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung. The scholarship (1995–1996) granted by the Humboldt-Foundation enabled me to pursue a research project on various aspects of rhetorical devices in the writings of Sima Qian at the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Faculty of East Asian Studies, Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany. This article is partly based on papers presented at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and at the biannual EACS-Conference in Barcelona 1996. See also my “Zur Selbstdarstellung des Sima Qian”, in: Christiane Hammer, Bernhard Führer (eds.), *Chinesisches Selbstverständnis und kulturelle Identität: “Wenhua Zhongguo”*. [Chinese self-image and cultural identity – “Wenhua Zhongguo”. *Collected papers of the 6th annual meeting 1995 of the German Association for Chinese Studies (DVCS)* (Dortmund: Projekt, 1996)], 35–49.

<sup>2</sup> See *Shiji* (10 vols., Beijing: Zhonghua, [1959] 1982), 130: 3285. In this genealogy, a preamble to the self-descriptive part of his postface of the *Shiji*, Sima Qian analogized the mantic task deriving from the earlier priest's (*shi*) observation of the celestial sphere and the scribe's (*shi*) responsibility of recording terrestrial events with a twofold origin of his family in early legendary times.

position of the history of the *orbis terrarum* (*tianxia*) as known in China in those days, and its interrelated cosmic aspects from the mythological beginnings up to the author's lifetime.<sup>3</sup>

The general image of the court scribe is also associated with the consequences which Sima Qian had to suffer in the aftermath of the defeat of the Han-warrior Li Ling (d. 74 B.C.).<sup>4</sup> His advocacy for the military leader, who surrendered to the arch enemy, is commonly reported as having triggered off his own humiliating punishment.<sup>5</sup> Further, we are reminded of Sima Tan's fateful legacy to his son, namely to continue and complete the historical narrative. In this context, it seems obvious that it was precisely his father's request which kept Sima Qian from suicide – considered the only adequate choice of a nobleman (*shi*) to avoid humiliation – to escape castration. In order to fulfil the bequeathed duty, he preferred to accept the degradation to a eunuch's existence.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Concerning the earlier titles, such as *Taishigong shu* (*Shiji*, 130: 3319), *Taishigong ji*, and the later title *Shiji*, which seemingly derived from the traditional technical term for regional histories and chronicles, see Sima Zhen's (fl. 745) *suoyin*-commentary in *Shiji*, 130: 3320, Chen Zhi, "Taishigong shu ming kao", in: Wang Guowei et al., *Sima Qian – qi shu ji qi ren* (Taibei: Chang'an, 1985), 187–194, and Wang Shumin, "Shiji mingcheng tanyuan", in: Huang Peirong (ed.), *Shiji lunwen xuanji* (Taibei: Chang'an, 1982), 181–198. On the rather complex question of authorship of the *Shiji*, which, I think, might also be understood as "Records of the Court Scribes", see Timoteus Pokora, "Shi chi 127. The Synopsis of Two Historians", in: Charles Le Blanc, Susan Blader (eds.), *Chinese Ideas about Nature and Society. Studies in Honour of Derk Bodde* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 1987), 215–234. For the *Shiji*, its translations and relevant secondary material see also the apprehensive introductory articles by Stephen W. Durrant, "Shih-chi" and "Ssu-ma Ch'ien", in: William H. Nienhauser Jr. (ed.), *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986), 689–692, 720–723, and by A.F.P. Hulswé, "Shih chi", in: Michael Loewe (ed.), *Early Chinese Texts. A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley: Society of the Study of Early China and Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1993), 404–414. For a survey on more recent studies on the *Shiji* see William H. Nienhauser Jr., "The Study of the Shih-chi (The Grand Scribe's Records) in the People's Republic of China", in: Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer (ed.), *Das andere China. Festschrift für Wolfgang Bauer zum 65. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995), 381–403.

<sup>4</sup> According to an account in *Xijing zaji* (*Sibu congkan*-ed.), 6: 3b–4a, Elfie Heeren-Diekhoff, *Das Hsi-ching tsa-chi. Vermischte Aufzeichnungen über die westliche Hauptstadt* (Weilheim: private publication, 1981), 237, parts of the *Shiji*, especially the description of his father's reign, aroused Han Wudi's displeasure. Accordingly, the Li Ling incident might well have been a welcomed pretext to punish its critical author.

<sup>5</sup> According to his own account, Sima Qian was found guilty of "deceiving the emperor" (*wu shang*), a term which does not seem to be a proper technical legal but merely a literary expression for a variety of *lèse-majesté*; for *wu shang* see also chapter *Yueji* in *Liji* (*Shisan jing zhushu*-ed.), 37: 7a [665], Séraphin Couvreur, *Li Ki ou Mémoires sur les Bienséances et les Cérémonies* (2 vols., Ho Kien Fou: Mission Catholique, 1913), II, 49–50.

<sup>6</sup> Theoretically, i.e. in terms of the official hierarchy, the office he held after castration was ranked higher than the position of a *taishigong* or *taishiling* (head of the imperial scribe office). Nevertheless, the point of reference of Sima Qian's evaluation was beyond the official hierarchy of the administrative system.

“Vegetating in disgrace and shame” he finds himself unable to become reconciled to his eunuch position.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, he dedicated the rest of his days to the completion of his historical records. From his choice of words, we perceive not only the shadow of a deeply disappointed and demoralized scholar who channelled his resentment into his narrative of the past, but also his full awareness of the necessity to express himself covertly in order to avoid to be handed over to the prison officers once again. The silhouette of the frustrated scholar criticizing the emperor and the ruling dynasty grew to be omnipresent in the history of Chinese literature. His writings, known for their alleged clear diction and archaic expression of the author’s inner feelings, modelled historiographical as well as literary criteria.<sup>8</sup>

Even though we do have this widespread and seemingly accurate perception of Sima Qian, I would like to raise the question “Which Sima Qian are we actually talking about?”<sup>9</sup> An investigation into the divergent images of the scribe-historian should distinguish the following main images:

Sima Qian – as presented in his biography written by the Han-historian Ban Gu (32–92), whose *History of the Han-dynasty* or *Hanshu* shows an entangled intertextual relationship with the material given in the *Shiji*, and whose background obviously differs from that of Sima Qian.<sup>10</sup>

Sima Qian – as an archetype in the glorification through later generations of Chinese writers and in the mind of his imitators and emulators. His literary style, considered the *ne plus ultra*, became an archetypal *exemplum antiquitatis* and the model for their *imitatio*.<sup>11</sup>

Sima Qian – as a narrative person and story-teller behind the texts attributed to him.

Sima Qian – as presented by Sima Qian himself, including the narrator who makes his pronouncements after the well-known formula *taishigong yue*.<sup>12</sup> In

---

<sup>7</sup> Paraphrasis from Sima Qian’s letter to Ren An.

<sup>8</sup> For a convincingly not outdated comment on this aspect see Gu Yanwu (comm. by Huang Rucheng), *Rizhilu jishi* (2 vols., Taipei: Shijie, 1991), *juan* 26 [II, 590–591].

<sup>9</sup> A closer look at the reception and the evaluations of the historian and his writings reveals crucial problems. For a handy compilation of traditional comments on the various chapters of the *Shiji* see Yang Yanqi et al., *Lidai mingjia ping Shiji* (Beijing: Shifan daxue, 1986 [rpt.: Taipei: Boyuan, 1990]).

<sup>10</sup> See Ban Gu, *Hanshu* (12 vols., Beijing: Zhonghua, [1962] 1987), 62: 2707–2739. This “biography” of Sima Qian is basically a slightly enlarged and revised copy of Sima Qian’s postface to the *Shiji* and includes a copy of his letter to Ren An.

<sup>11</sup> In, e.g., Lin Shu’s (1852–1924) Chinese adaptations of Western literature, this stylistic tradition survived until quite recent times.

<sup>12</sup> See *Shiji*, 130: 3285–3322. On the, in part, autobiographical nature of the relevant documents see Stephen W. Durrant, “Self as Intersection of Traditions: The Autobiographical Writings of Ssu-ma Ch’ien”, in: *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 106.1 (1986), 33–40. See also Manfred W. Frühauf, *Frühformen der chinesischen Autobiographie* (Frankfurt/Main: Lang, 1987), Wolfgang Bauer, *Das Antlitz Chinas. Die autobiographische Selbstdarstellung in der*

addition to the postface to the *Shiji* and his letter to Ren An – the two central documents of Sima Qian’s self-description – valuable supplementary information is provided in his comments integrated in the *Shiji*, namely the *Biography of Qu Yuan*, the *Hereditary House of Confucius*, parts of the *Biographical Treatise on the Xiongnu* etc., and in his various references to his own extensive travels throughout the Han-empire.<sup>13</sup> In accordance with the traditional pedagogical function of history (*historia docet*), Sima Qian’s intended evaluations of personalities as well as of ethical standards can be deduced from his portrayals.<sup>14</sup> This essay focuses on his narrative of his life and work on the *Shiji* which are presented mainly in analogy to the vita of Confucius and his compilation of the *Chunqiu*, attributed to the sage by *Mencius*.<sup>15</sup> We are therefore investigating into Sima Qian’s letter to his acquaintance, Ren An (Ren Shaoqing), who was imprisoned and awaited execution having been found guilty of opportunist attitude in connection with the palace intrigue, the witchcraft case, and the attempted revolt of crown prince Li against the old and ailing Han Wudi in 91 B.C.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the disputed date of this letter, 91 or 93 B.C. (?), and the exact circumstances which lead to Ren An’s condemnation, this letter is traditionally considered a milestone in the stylistic development of Chinese epistologra-

---

*chinesischen Literatur von ihren Anfängen bis Heute* (München: Hanser, 1990), 79–81, 83–89, and Wu Pei-yi [Wu Baiyi], *The Confucian’s Progress. Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1990), 42f. Concerning more theoretical aspects of the literary genre of autobiography see also Günter Niggel (ed.), *Die Autobiographie. Zu Form und Geschichte einer literarischen Gattung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), Helmut Winter, *Der Aussagewert von Selbstbiographien* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1985), and Jürgen Lehmann, *Bekennen – Erzählen – Berichten. Studien zu Theorie und Geschichte der Autobiographie* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> In his description of the Xiongnu-federation Sima Qian gives a cogent indication of his narrative freedom being conditioned and restricted by the political circumstances. Note that he describes his situation by drawing an analogy with his conception of Confucius’ work as an historian; see *Shiji*, 110: 2919, and Hans van Ess, “Die geheimen Worte des Ssu-ma Ch’ien”, in: *Oriens Extremus*, 36.1 (1993), 5–28. For a – in the light of the *Shiji* – incomplete account of his travels see *Shiji*, 130: 3293, and *Hanshu*, 62: 2714–2715.

<sup>14</sup> For the *Shiji* as a demonstration of “the Chinese of the view that *historia docet*” see A.F.P. Hulswé, “Notes on the Historiography of the Han Period”, in: W.G. Beasley, E.G. Pulleyblank (eds.), *Historians of China and Japan* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1961), 36.

<sup>15</sup> For a literary study of Sima Qian’s self-perception, his self-portrayal and intellectual background see Stephen W. Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror. Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (New York: State University of New York, 1995). See also Ruan Zhisheng, “Sima Qian de xin”, in: *Wenshizhe xuebao*, 23 (1974), 197–220, and Jean Levi, “Sima Qian, Han Wudi et l’éternité”, in: Jean-Pierre Diény (ed.), *Hommage à Kwong Hing Foon. Études d’histoire culturelle de Chine* (Paris: Collège de France, 1995), 43–75.

<sup>16</sup> For Ren An and his involvement in this incident see Chu Shaosun’s (c. 30 B.C.) interpolation in *Shiji* 104: 3779, *Hanshu*, 66: 2881, the annotations in *Liu chen zhu Wenxuan* (Sibu congkan-ed.), 41: 9b–19a, 11b [763–764].

phy.<sup>17</sup> Further, it is traditionally believed, that Ren An asked Sima Qian for help in his desperate situation and that Sima Qian's letter was written answering Ren An's request for assistance.<sup>18</sup> Although no such letter of Ren An has survived, Sima Qian refers to a letter he presumably had received from Ren An.<sup>19</sup> Besides Ren An's rather generalized suggestion to introduce and recommend worthy gentlemen to the court, as reported by Sima Qian, only little is known about the content of this letter.<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding, there is not nearly enough concrete evidence for Ren An's plea for assistance in his own plight, but in case he did so, "it would appear that Jen An was singularly naive in asking help of Ssu-ma Ch'ien",<sup>21</sup> who had lost the emperor's favour himself. Despite the well-articulated motivation for the letter and consideration of the addressee, i.e. the fulfilment of the *apte dicere*, the skilful references to traditional formulae and anecdotes are much more concerned with the author's complaints than with the receiver's affairs.<sup>22</sup> Aside from its heart-moving vent of personal frustration, this letter shows passages which, in terms of content, re-phrase ideas expressed more formally in the postface (*zixu*) to the *Shiji*. Whereas the author's description of his ego, credo, and work on the historical narrative in chapter 130 of the *Shiji* is bound by the stylistic criteria of the *zixu*, the form of a letter – despite its polite formulaic opening and ending – offered more ample scope for voicing his genuine feelings. Basically, a letter is supposed to be a one-sided expression aiming at a certain effect on the receiver, but due to its (occasional) fictional dialogue the letter is considered (by Western rhetoricians) to be very near to the *oratio*.<sup>23</sup> Sima Qian's letter shows this device as well as the simulation of the addressee's reaction, a variety of the *sermocinatio*, in an astonishing way.<sup>24</sup> As a self-description, this document does not only mirror its author's state of mind. Besides the account of his own experience and sufferings, the letter also demon-

---

<sup>17</sup> Concerning the date of the letter see the summary in Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien. Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University, 1958), 194–198, and Édouard Chavannes, *Les mémoires historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien* ([5 vols., Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1895–1905] rpt: 6 vols., Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1967), I, xlii. For an excellent general study on the letters of Han times see Eva Yuen-wah Chung, *A Study of the "shu" (letters) of the Han Dynasty* (2 vols.; Ph.D.Diss. University of Washington, 1982 [Ann Arbor: UMI, 1995]).

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Chavannes, *Mémoires historiques*, I, xliii.

<sup>19</sup> The use of the word *bao* (answer, reply) in the letter's title given in *Hanshu* and *Wenxuan* emphasizes its answering aspect: "A Letter in Reply to Ren An / Shaoqing".

<sup>20</sup> See the short summary of inconsistent data concerning Ren An's letter in Dzo Ching-chuan [Zuo Jingquan], *Sseu-ma Ts'ien et l'Historiographie Chinoise* (Paris: Orientalistes de France, 1978), 182.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Algerton Kierman Jr., *Ssu-ma Chien's Historiographical Attitude as reflected in four Late Warring States Biographies* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1962), 52.

<sup>22</sup> In this context it is also noteworthy that in chapter 130 of the *Shiji* Sima Qian gives a more detailed account of his father than of himself.

<sup>23</sup> See Wolfgang G. Müller, "Brief", in: Gert Ueding (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* (3 vols. hitherto; Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1992–1996), II, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Note also the extensive use of rhetorical questions and affective exclamations in the letter.

strates a typical trait of self-descriptive writings, i.e. the writer's apology of himself and his accusation against all those who made him feel misunderstood. By presenting an account of the circumstances and reasons that lead him to submit to the legal sanctions, the author justifies his decision reached in the classic dilemma between the duties of filial obedience or piety (*xiao*) and the socially imposed last resort, i.e. suicide. The question whether he would have been appeased and satisfied by revealing himself to a person close to him or would rather aim at explaining himself to posterity, leads to the issue of his targeted audience. By writing a private letter (*epistula familiaris*) in its strict sense, the author excludes the public. The purpose of writing would therefore be restricted exclusively to the communication between Sima Qian and Ren An.<sup>25</sup> Whereas genuine private letters exclude or at least pretend to exclude public, literary letters are addressed, *pro forma*, to a specified receiver but written with an eye to the public. However, the borderline between these two sub-genres is in flux. What seems noteworthy about the relationship between the writer and the receiver of this letter is the fact, that besides Ban Gu's term *guren* (friend) we hardly find evidence for Ren An being very intimate with Sima Qian.<sup>26</sup> Quite apart from this objection, a serious difficulty stems from the fact that the two known versions of the letter show significant divergences. The Eastern-Han historian Ban Gu based himself primarily on Sima Qian's self-descriptions by compiling Sima Qian's *zixu* (chapter 130 of the *Shiji*) and his letter to Ren An (*Bao Ren An shu*) into his account of the vita of Sima Qian.<sup>27</sup> A slightly different version was regarded as a literary text and selected by Xiao Tong (501–531) in his *Selections of Refined Literature*, the *Wenxuan*, under the title *Bao Ren Shaoqing shu*.<sup>28</sup> Much scholarship was spent on the textual accuracy of these two versions. Supposedly in virtue of its antecedency, most translators consider Ban Gu's version more accurate and therefore follow the *Hanshu*-edition.<sup>29</sup> However, we do not know whether Sima Qian actually sent the letter to Ren An

<sup>25</sup> Tradition has it, that some highly ambiguous passages of the text point to this conclusion.

<sup>26</sup> See Ban Gu's short introduction to the letter in *Hanshu*, 62: 2725.

<sup>27</sup> See *Hanshu*, 62: 2725–2736.

<sup>28</sup> See Xiao Tong, *Wenxuan* (Taipei: Hanjing, 1983 [Hu Kejia-ed. in: *Sibu kanyao*]), 41: 7b–18b [576–581], and *Liu chen zhu Wenxuan*, 41: 9b–27a [763–772].

<sup>29</sup> For more useful English translations of the letter see Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien. Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University, 1958), 57–67, 214–220 (notes), James Robert Hightower's version in: Cyril Birch (ed.), *Anthology of Chinese Literature. From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Grove, 1965), 95–102, and Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature. Beginnings to 1911* (New York: Norton, 1996), 136–142. See also the French translations by Chavannes, *Mémoires historiques*, I, ccxxvi–ccxxxviii [i.e. appendix I to his introduction], and Dzo, *Sseu-ma T'sien et l'Historiographie Chinoise*, 153–167, and the partial German translations by Ernst Schwarz, *Der Ruf der Phönixflöte. Klassische chinesische Prosa* (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, [1973] 1984), 175–191, and Wolfgang Bauer, *Das Antlitz Chinas. Die autobiographische Selbstdarstellung in der chinesischen Literatur von ihren Anfängen bis Heute* (München: Hanser, 1990), 84–87. Note that only Chavannes and Watson (partially also Dzo) discuss textual variants.

and whether the latter received it in prison or not. And we know nothing about the fate of this document until Ban Gu's edition.<sup>30</sup> But in the light of some similar textual divergences between the postface of the *Shiji* and its copy in the *Hanshu*, Ban Gu's version appears likely to be some kind of (deliberately?) toned down criticism towards the Han-régime.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of earlier unfortunately unsubstantiated statements, such as “Je ne crois pas à l'authenticité de la lettre de Sseu-ma Ts'ien à Jen Ngan”,<sup>32</sup> I tend to assume that this letter, though formally addressed to Ren An, was in fact written by Sima Qian in order to explain himself to posterity.<sup>33</sup> Thus, I think, it can be read to a large degree as a genuine self-portrayal.

Let us shift our focus and proceed to a microscopic inquiry of some rhetorical devices used by Sima Qian in painting a specific image of himself. His allusions to both historical and pseudo-historical events as well as persons, his arrangement of precedents, and his evaluations of personalities are analysed as instruments of his “literary rhetoric”. By referring to “literary rhetoric” or “literarische Rhetorik”, I mean the use of rhetoric as a system of hermeneutics. This approach was developed out of rhetoric as a system of rules for the composition of speeches and writings laid down by the Greek and Roman rhetoricians. Thereafter, the system of the rules of composition was inverted into a system of the analysis of texts. In other words, the theoretical apparatus of this investigation is primarily based on the methodical use of rhetoric as a means of the analysis of literary texts found, e.g., in Heinrich Lausberg's study of Greek and Roman rhetoric.<sup>34</sup> Recollecting Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim for the “unlimited

---

<sup>30</sup> I may remark, in passing, that we do not know how the textual divergences arose. Furthermore, *ignoramus et ignorabimus*, I surely do not know which edition might represent a “more authentic” version of the letter.

<sup>31</sup> Compare Sima Qian's description of the duties and functions of the historian's enterprise in *Shiji*, 130: 3297, with Ban Gu's version of the relevant passage in *Hanshu*, 62: 2717. Whereas the *Shiji*-version describes the critical evaluation of the emperor's performance (*bian tianzi*) as one of the duties of the historian, this sensitive task is omitted in Ban Gu's copy. Note also, that the entire relevant passage is presented as a quotation from Dong Zhongshu (c. 179–104 B.C.) and is therefore understood as an application of a rhetoric strategy of self-protection.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Pelliot, “Review of: Arthur W. Hummel, *The Autobiography of a Chinese historian*”, in: *T'oung Pao*, 29 (1932), 132.

<sup>33</sup> See also Chavannes, *Mémoires historiques*, I, xlii (note 1), and J.J.L. Duyvendak, “Review of: John K. Shryock: *The Origin of the State Cult of Confucius*”, in: *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 55 (1935), 332–333.

<sup>34</sup> See Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik. Eine Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft* (2 vols., München: Hueber [1960] 21973), Heinrich Lausberg, *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik*, (München: Hueber, [1963] 101990), Heinrich F. Plett, *Einführung in die rhetorische Textanalyse* (Hamburg: Buske, [1971] 81991). Based on Lausberg's approach, a noteworthy catalogue of rhetorical devices collected from classical Chinese texts was published by Ulrich Unger, *Rhetorik des klassischen Chinesisch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994); see also my “Review of: Ulrich Unger, *Rhetorik des klassischen Chinesisch*”, in: *Oriens Extremus*, 39.1 (1996), 119–123.

ubiquity of rhetoric”, the illustrative analysis of the following textual samples is based on the thesis that rhetorical devices of Chinese literary texts can be used as a system of exegesis. Sima Qian believed that personal experience is a potent factor for bringing significant emotions into literary creativity, as can easily be derived from his laudatory tribute to Qu Yuan (c. 340 – c. 278 B.C.) and other references.<sup>35</sup> The investigation of the scribe’s choice of words designed to show his inner feelings, his motivation for creativity, his frustration, as well as his mournful lamento, intends to provide a practicable key for the appreciation of his covert meaning, frequently verbalized through suggestions and overtones.

Sima Qian, the “groom of the honoured Court Scribe” – thus the self-humiliating formulaic salutation used in the opening of his letter, rejected the request “to introduce wise men [to the court] and to promote noble men”.<sup>36</sup> As stated above, it is widely believed, that Ren An’s reminding Sima Qian of this duty of the civil servant enunciated by imperial edict ought to be understood as a plea for assistance in his own unlucky affair. Whatever purpose Ren An had in mind in proclaiming this general maxim, Sima Qian, in rejecting his request, relies on amending the passage

There are no true men in the state: no one to understand me (*guo wu ren mo wo zhi xi*).<sup>37</sup>

from Qu Yuan’s epilogue (*luan*) to his *Lisao*. Besides, the verse

Alone with my misery, I had no one to confide in (*du yu jie qi shei yu*).<sup>38</sup>

from *Yuanyou* in the *Chuci* may also have served as a model in his choice of words, when he says:

With whom should I talk [about my grief and sorrow] (*yu shei yu*)?<sup>39</sup>

The emphasis of this sentence, which occurs in the letter’s *Hanshu*-version as factual statement *wu shei yu* (Nobody I could talk [about] with), is further intensified by an answering question vested with the authority of a proverb (*yan*).<sup>40</sup> By replying

---

<sup>35</sup> See the masterly compiled biography of Qu Yuan (and Jia Yi) in *Shiji*, 84: 2481–2504. For Qu Yuan see also Laurence A. Schneider, *A Madman of Ch’u. The Chinese Myth of Loyalty and Dissent* (Berkeley: University of California, 1980).

<sup>36</sup> For these two citations see both *Wenxuan*, 41: 7b [576], and *Hanshu*, 62: 2725. My reading of the highly obscure opening formula explained differently by traditional exegetes follows the *Wenxuan*-edition and is primarily based on Li Shan’s (c. 630–689) commentary. Compare also the abridged version in *Hanshu*.

<sup>37</sup> Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu* (*Sibu congkan*-ed.), 1: 49a [26], transl. by David Hawkes, *Ch’u Tz’u. The Songs of the South. An Ancient Chinese Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 34.

<sup>38</sup> Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 5: 1b [87], transl. by Hawkes, *Ch’u Tz’u*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> *Wenxuan*, 41: 8a [576].

<sup>40</sup> *Hanshu*, 62: 2725.



For whom should [one] do something (*shei wei wei zhi*)? Who would listen to (*shu ling ting zhi*)?<sup>41</sup>

Sima Qian takes use of the *argumentum ad verecundiam*. The pseudo-dialogue or “dialogical monologue” (Lausberg) of this Answer-Question-Play (*subiectio*) echoes the words of Qu Yuan, who plummeted from celebrated adviser to *persona non grata*. Qu Yuan’s “free fall” resulted in his lowering himself together with his grief and sorrow in the river, whereas Sima Qian refused suicide as a means of escaping the mutilating punishment. The degradation of Qu Yuan was, of course, caused by intrigues of his colleagues, which was considered one of the main sources of personal frustration by Sima Qian. What seems to be even more interesting in this context is the fact that Qu Yuan’s king was not enlightened enough to recognize the inner qualities of his loyal and honest adviser. In analogy to the pattern of Qu Yuan created and laid down in the *Shiji*, Sima Qian’s phrasing focuses on the emperor’s and the imperial entourage’s incomprehension of his point of view. No wonder that none of these close to Han Wudi received a positive evaluation in the *Shiji*. The fact that he could find no one at the court willing to give him an opportunity to express his loyal and honest thoughts is one of the central themes throughout his letter addressed to a man, who also may have been – or seems to have been – wrongly accused. The author’s conclusions are constantly presented through numerous historically, mythologically and literarily defined precedents (*exemplum, paradeigma*). The first paradigm presented in a series of examples is the story of a divinely gifted musician, who destroyed his zither (*qin*) after the death of the only recipient sensible enough to understand the inner feelings, emotions, ambitions and even ideas of the musician beyond his tunes. The legend of Bo Ya and Zhong Ziqi, which of course is transmitted in the *Lüshi chunqiu*, the *Liezi* and the *Huainanzi* is one of the outstanding traditional anecdotes exemplifying the concept of *zhiyin*, the understanding listening or the sympathetic reception.<sup>42</sup> In later Chinese thought on arts and literature it developed into such an eminent concept that in the early 6th century Liu Xie (c. 465–522) devoted a whole chapter of his *Wenxin diaolong* to it.<sup>43</sup> Sima Qian’s claim for the understanding sympathetic recipient finds also a significant parallel in a description of the ambitions of Con-

---

<sup>41</sup> *Wenxuan*, 41: 8a [576], and *Hanshu*, 62: 2725.

<sup>42</sup> For the story of Bo Ya (var.: Boya) and Zhong Ziqi see Lü Buwei, *Lüshi chunqiu* (*Sibu congkan*-ed.), 14: 4b–5a [81], Richard Wilhelm, *Frühling und Herbst des Lü Bu We* (Düsseldorf: Diederichs, [1971] 1979), 180f, Zhang Zhan, *Liezi zhu* (Taipei: Yiwen, 1972), 77, Angus Charles Graham, *The Book of Lieh-tzu. A Classic of Tao* (New York: Columbia University, 1990), 109–110, Richard Wilhelm, *Liä Dsi. Das wahre Buch vom quellenden Urgrund* (Düsseldorf: Diederichs, [1967] 1980), 112–113, and Liu Wendian, *Huainan honglie jizie* (2 vols., Beijing: Zhonghua, 1989), II, 654.

<sup>43</sup> See Fan Wenlan, *Wenxin diaolong zhu* (rpt.: Taipei: Minglun, 1974), 713–718, and Vincent Yu-chung Shih [Shi Youzhong], *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Hongkong: Chinese University, 1983), 502–511. See also the relevant remarks in Bernhard Führer, *Chinas erste Poetik. Das Shipin (Kriterion Poietikon) des Zhong Hong* (Dortmund: Projekt, 1995).

fucius by He Xiu (129–182) in his commentary to *Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan*.<sup>44</sup> By the same phrasing, Sima Qian also expresses his yearning to be subject to a “wise king” or “wise emperor”, i.e. the sovereign who has such qualities as *ming*, *zhe* or *zhi* at his disposal. As a consequence of these qualifications, the idealized ruler is supposed to be able to see and to appreciate the hidden positive qualities of his subjects. Furthermore, he would naturally treat his subjects in the way prescribed in the codified ritual relationship between the superior (*shang*) and his inferiors (*xia*). In other words, Sima Qian calls for the wise ruler (*zhi jun* and *hou sheng*) styled on idealized legendary models such as Yao and Shun.<sup>45</sup> Consistently, Sima Qian continued his series of references to meaningful anecdotes by naming Bian He, who, according to the famous story given in the *Hanfeizi*, was blamed for cheating the king and cut off his two legs before he finally met a wise king, who knew to appreciate the offered stone-covered jade symbolizing the hidden inner qualities of this exemplary servant.<sup>46</sup> By referring to this anecdote, Sima Qian does not lament the physical nor the social mutilation caused by castration. Especially in connection with the concepts concerning the appropriate relationship between ruler and servant as described in chapter *Benwei* of the *Lüshi chunqiu*, his critical statement is directed towards Han Wudi, whose moral qualification as an emperor is questioned in a remarkably straight way.<sup>47</sup>

Throughout this letter, we find various historical or semi-historical examples, the description of which differs in part from the account in the *Shiji*. In his short references, Sima Qian names the central characters, and sometimes outlines relevant aspects of their life in few words. But, *prima facie*, the occasionally vivid remarks of these *dramatis personae* which mostly follow humiliation and injustice – further important sources of deep frustration for Sima Qian – seem to be frequently omitted in the letter. But these remarks, which form the thrust of the whole anecdote and therefore represent the quintessence of the reference, must be understood as an integral part of the associations evoked by the author. Hence, it is seminal to localize the source texts of these references. Their study shows explicitly that Sima Qian frequently paraphrased these remarks in his conclusions of textual sequences, sometimes even cited them verbatim. Deduced from the historical event, the at times highly vigorous sayings of the cheated and humiliated get a new *emphasis* after integration into Sima Qian’s text.

<sup>44</sup> See *Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan* (*Shisan jing zhushu*-ed.), 28: 15a [339].

<sup>45</sup> On the concept of the ideal ruler in the *Shiji* as developed in the *Wudi benji* see Zhou Xianmin, “Jin shan jin mei de lixiang diwang”, in: *Wenxue yichan*, 1995.3, 13–21.

<sup>46</sup> For the story of Bian He see Chen Qiyou, *Hanfeizi jijie* (2 vol., Taipei: Shijie, 1984), I, 238, W.K. Liao [Liao Wenkui], *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu. A Classic of Chinese Political Science* (2 vols.; London: Probsthain, 1959), I, 113.

<sup>47</sup> On the implications of correct and incorrect relationship between ruler and subject see chapter *Benwei* of the *Lüshi chunqiu*, loc. cit.

As an example, I would like to select the remark of an imperial adviser who was turned down because of the emperor favouring a eunuch. Following Confucius, who considered this kind of preference to be symptomatic (*signa*) for the ruler's inability and insincerity as well as for the decline of a state, and seeing the eunuch Zhao Tan, one of his intimate personal enemies, sitting together with the emperor in the carriage of state, Yuan Ang prostrated himself in front of the emperor's carriage and said:

I heard that only the most distinguished men under the heaven (*tianxia haoying*) have the privilege to sit in the carriage with his majesty. Although [the house of the] Han today lacks [worthy] men (*jin Han sui fa ren*), your slave cannot imagine why your majesty [sits] in the same carriage with a remnant of the knife and saw (*daoju zhi yu*)!<sup>48</sup>

This is the text given in the biography of Yuan Ang in *Shiji*. Referring to this anecdote which itself, of course, refers to Confucius' leaving the state of Wei after the well-known similar incident in the year 495 B.C., Sima Qian writes in his letter to Ren An:

Although nowadays the court lacks [worthy] men (*ru jin chaoting sui fa ren*), what should be the use of asking a remnant of the knife and saw (*daoju zhi yu*) to introduce the most distinguished men under the heaven (*tianxia haojun*) [to the imperial court]?<sup>49</sup>

Whereas in Yuan Ang's statement, the word "today" (*jin*) refers to the time of the reign of Liu Heng (202–157 B.C.), Han Wendi (r. 180–157 B.C.), in Sima Qian's answer to Ren An the same word refers to their own times, extends the given diagnosis of the Han to the present, and thereby makes his indictment of Han Wudi and his entourage topical.

One of the high points of the letter consists of Sima Qian's description of the emperor's reaction following his argumentation and pleading in behalf of Li Ling, whose defeat by the Xiongnu was the result of strategic mistakes by a brother of the emperor's favourite concubine and the emperor himself. As far as we know from his own report, Sima Qian extolled Li Ling's merits by stressing his outstanding moral qualification and – despite his defeat – elevated him into the ranks of the most famous generals of antiquity. After declaring his most honest, sincere, and loyal intentions in a very unambiguous way, his description of the emperor's reaction, following the *Wenxuan*-edition, culminates in the sentence:

---

<sup>48</sup> For this story see *Shiji*, 101: 2739, translation adapted from Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian* (3 vols., Hong Kong, New York: Columbia University, [1961] 1993), I, 456. See also *Hanshu*, 49: 2270, where Yuan Ang's (*zi*: Si) clan-name is written slightly different. Concerning the intimate relationship between the eunuch Zhao Tan and the emperor see also Ulrike Jugel, *Politische Funktion und soziale Stellung der Eunuchen zur Späteren Han-Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1976), 123.

<sup>49</sup> *Wenxuan*, 41: 9b [577]; see also the slightly different wording in *Hanshu*, 62: 2727.

Before I could make myself clear (*wei neng jin ming*), the enlightened emperor did not understand [me] (*ming zhu bu xiao*).<sup>50</sup>

Following the *Shuowen jiezi*, the words *ming* (bright, dawn, [to make] clear, perspicuous etc.) and *xiao* (dawn, light, bright, to understand, to enlighten) are synonyms.<sup>51</sup> The phrasing *ming zhu bu xiao* is therefore understood as a *contradictio in adiecto*. From a syntactical point of view, we can make out an *anadiplosis* or *reduplicatio* of the word *ming* which occurs as the last word of the first sentence and the first word of the second syntactical unit and adds an additional stress on the aspect of contradiction. It is plausible, I think, that the nexus of the epitheton *ming zhu* with the antithetical *bu xiao* constitutes an oxymoron (*synoikeiosis*). If we consider furthermore the relevant glosses in Yang Xiong's *Fangyan*, which explain *xiao* as a synonym of *zhe* (wise) and *zhi* (wise, to know), the sentence *ming zhu bu xiao* can be read as "the wise emperor is not wise".<sup>52</sup> Obviously, this brings a distinct political dimension of Sima Qian's critical judgement into focus. I would also like to point out, however, that in the text-corpus of the *Shiji* as well as in the letter to Ren An the emperor Han Wudi is normally addressed as *jin shang* or *zhu shang*. In addition, based on the various concordances, we can perceive a preference for the term *ming zhu* in the works associated with so-called legalist (*fajia*) thinkers.<sup>53</sup> The administration of the Qin as well as its main representatives, its law and the impartial implementation of the system of rewards and punishments, are characterized by Sima Qian not only in a negative, (occasionally) sarcastic way, but – *poetis mentiri licet* (Plinius) – also in a historically not perfectly reliable manner. The epitheton *ming zhu* may therefore also be understood as a coded reference to parallels between Qin Shihuang (259–210) and Han Wudi suggested by Sima Qian.<sup>54</sup> In his self-descriptive narrative, the very fountainhead of his self-created legend, Sima Qian presented himself as a prototype of the wrongly convicted and therefore frustrated loyal subject suffering a Draconian punishment under a "non-enlightened" (*bu ming / bu xiao*) despotic ruler.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the sentence discussed above reads

---

<sup>50</sup> *Wenxuan*, 41: 12a [576].

<sup>51</sup> See Xu Shen (comm. by Duan Yucai), *Shuowen jiezi zhu* (Shanghai: Guji, 1981), 7A: 3a [303].

<sup>52</sup> See Yang Xiong (comm. by Qian Yi), *Fangyan jianshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1991), 2.

<sup>53</sup> See Esson M. Gale, *Discourses on Salt and Iron. A Debate on State Control of Commerce and Industry in Ancient China* (rpt.: Taipei: Ch'eng-wen, 1967), 36.

<sup>54</sup> Concerning the description of Qin Shihuang in *Shiji* see Stephen W. Durrant, "Ssu-ma Ch'ien's portrayal of the first Ch'in emperor", in: Frederick P. Brandauer, Chun-Chieh Huang (eds.), *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1994), 28–50.

<sup>55</sup> See Levi, "Sima Qian, Han Wudi et l'éternité", 48.

Before I could make myself clear (*wei neng jin ming*), the enlightened emperor did not understand [me] completely (*ming zhu bu shen xiao*).<sup>56</sup>

in Ban Gu's version. Obviously, the additional word *shen* (deep; completely) fitted into this sentence draws a rather different light on Sima Qian's statement. It moderates his testimony in essence by acknowledging that the emperor at least partially understood his subject's remarks.

*Bao Ren An shu* 報任安書  
*Bao Ren Shaoqing shu* 報任少卿書  
 Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書  
*Benwei* 本味  
 Bian He 卞和  
 bian tianzi 貶天子  
 Bo Ya 伯牙  
 bu ming 不明  
 bu xiao 不曉  
 Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷, *Hanfeizi jijie* 韓非子  
 集解  
 Chen Zhi 陳直, "Taishigong shu ming kao"  
 太史公書名考  
*Chuci* 楚辭  
 Chu Shaosun 褚少孫  
*Chunqiu* 春秋  
*Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan* 春秋公羊傳  
 daoju zhi yu 刀鋸之餘  
 Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒  
 du yu jie qi shei yu 獨鬱結其誰語  
*Fangyan* 方言  
 guren 故人  
 Gu Yanwu 顧炎武, Huang Rucheng 黃汝成,  
*Rizhilu jishi* 日知錄集釋  
 guo wu ren mo wo zhi xi 國無人莫我知兮  
 fajia 法家  
 Fan Wenlan 范文瀾, *Wenxin diaolong zhu*  
 文心雕龍註  
 Han Wudi 漢武帝  
 Han Wendi 漢文帝  
*Hanfeizi* 韓非子  
*Hanshu* 漢書  
 Huanghe tang 黃鶴堂  
 He Xiu 何休  
 Hu Kejia 胡克家  
 hou sheng 後聖  
 Huainanzi 淮南子

Huang Peirong 黃沛榮, *Shiji lunwen xuanji*  
 史記論文選集  
 Jia Yi 賈誼  
 jin 今  
 jin Han sui fa ren 今漢雖乏人  
 jin shang 今上  
 juan 卷  
 Li 戾  
 Li Ling 李陵  
 Li Shan 李善  
*Liji* 禮記  
*Lisao* 離騷  
 Liao Wenkui 廖文奎  
 Liezi 列子  
 Lin Shu 林紓  
 Liu Che 劉徹  
*Liu chen zhu Wenxuan* 六臣註文選  
 Liu Heng 劉恆  
 Liu Wendian 劉文典, *Huainan honglie jijie*  
 淮南鴻烈集解  
 Liu Xie 劉勰, *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍  
 luan 亂  
 Lü Buwei 呂不韋, *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋  
*Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋  
 ming zhu 明主  
 qin 琴  
 Ren An 任安  
 Ren Shaoqing 任少卿  
 ru jin chaoting sui fa ren 如今朝廷雖乏人  
 Ruan Zhisheng 阮芝生, "Sima Qian de xin"  
 司馬遷的心  
 shang 上  
 shen 深  
 shei wei wei zhi 誰爲爲之  
 shi 史  
 shi 士  
 Shi Youzhong 施友忠  
*Shiji* 史記

<sup>56</sup> See *Hanshu*, 62: 2730.

shu ling ting zhi 孰令聽之  
*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字  
 Shun 舜  
 Sima Qian 司馬遷  
 Sima Tan 司馬談  
 Sima Zhen 司馬貞, *suoyin* 索隱  
 taishigong 太史公  
*Taishigong shu* 太史公書  
*Taishigong ji* 太史公記  
 taishigong yue 太史公曰  
 taishiling 太史令  
 tianxia 天下  
 tianxia haojun 天下豪俊  
 tianxia haoying 天下豪英  
 Wang Guowei 王國維, *Sima Qian – qi ren ji qi shu* 司馬遷 – 其人及其書  
 Wang Shumin 王叔岷, "Shiji mingcheng tan-yuan" 史記名稱探源  
 wei neng jin ming, ming zhu bu shen xiao 未能盡明, 明主不深曉  
 wei neng jin ming, ming zhu bu xiao 未能盡明, 明主不曉  
*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍  
*Wenxuan* 文選  
 Wu Baiyi 吳百益  
 wu shang 誣上  
 wu shei yu 無誰語  
*Wudi benji* 五帝本紀  
*Xijing zaji* 西京雜記  
 xia 下  
 xiao 孝  
 xiao 曉  
 Xiao Tong 蕭統, *Wenxuan* 文選  
 Xiongnu 匈奴  
 Xu Shen 許慎, Duan Yucui 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注  
 yan 諺  
 Yang Xiong 揚雄, Qian Yi 錢繹, *Fangyan jianshu* 方言箋疏  
 Yao 堯  
 Yuan Ang 袁盎 (Si 絲)  
*Yuanyou* 遠遊  
*Yueji* 樂記  
 Zhang Zhan 張湛, *Liezi zhu* 列子注  
 Zhao Tan 趙談  
 zhe 哲  
 zhi 知 / 智  
 zhiyin 知音  
 zhi jun 知君  
 Zhong Ziqi 鍾子期  
 Zhou Xianmin 周先民, "Jin shan jin mei de lixiang diwang" 盡善盡美的理想帝王  
 zhu shang 主上  
 Zhuanyu 顛瑣  
 zixu 自序  
 Zuo Jingquan 左景權