CHAPTER 1

BIOGRAPHIES IN THE *HISTORICAL RECORDS* AND THE QUESTION OF THE INTELLECTUAL'S AUTONOMY[1]

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Abstract

The biographical genre is frequently and justifiably singled out as one of Sima Qian's major breakthroughs in the history of Chinese historiography. The purpose of this essay is to analyze this genre from the angle of political culture in traditional China. Based on his recent analysis of the role of *ming* 名 (name, fame, repute) in early Chinese political thought, the author explores commemoration in Sima Qian's biographies as a reaction to the state's attempt to monopolize control over individual *ming*. The latter attempt, which is articulated in the writings associated with Shang Yang 商鞅 and Han Fei 韓非, peaked under the system of "ranks of merit." Through massive conferral of these ranks, the state attempted to control not only individuals' economic, social, political, and legal status, but also their prestige. Whereas the state's monopolization of *ming* was bitterly opposed in the writings of many leading intellectuals, most notably Xun zi 荀子, none of them proposed any alternative mechanism that would create a "name" for outstanding individuals. Sima Qian's invention of "historiographic immortality" as expounded with great clarity in the first of his biographical chapters created precisely such an alternative mechanism. It turned a historian — rather than a power-holder — into the ultimate judge of individual reputation, and especially of one's posthumous fame. In due time, the historical genre became the major asset of intellectuals in their attempt to preserve a certain degree of moral autonomy in the ruler-centered state.

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CHAPITRE 1

LES BIOGRAPHIES DANS LES *MÉMOIRES HISTORIQUES* ET LA QUESTION DE L'AUTONOMIE DES INTELLECTUELS

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Résumé

Le genre biographique est fréquemment, et à juste titre, identifié comme l'une des avancées majeures de Sima Qian dans l'histoire de l'historiographie chinoise. Cet essai propose d'analyser ce genre sous l'angle de la culture politique chinoise traditionnelle. Se basant sur son étude récente du rôle joué par le *ming* 名 (nom, renom, renommée) dans la pensée politique en Chine ancienne, l'auteur explore la fonction commémorative de l'écriture biographique de Sima Qian comme une réaction à la tentative par l'État de monopoliser le contrôle du *ming* individuel. Cette tentative, qu'articulent les écrits associés aux noms de Shang Yang 商鞅 et Han Fei 韓非, connut son apogée dans le système des "rangs de mérite." Grâce à l'attribution systématique de ces rangs, l'État tentait de contrôler non seulement le statut économique, social, politique et légal de l'individu, mais aussi son prestige. Bien que de nombreux intellectuels, en particulier Xun zi 荀子, se soient opposés dans leurs écrits à cette monopolisation du *ming* par l'État, aucun d'eux ne proposa de mécanisme alternatif de création d'un "nom" pour les individus hors du commun. En inventant une "immortalité historiographique" telle que l'expose clairement le premier de ses chapitres biographiques, Sima Qian créa précisément un tel mécanisme, faisant de l'historien — plutôt que du détenteur du pouvoir — le juge ultime de la renommée individuelle, et plus particulièrement de la célébrité posthume. Le genre historique allait ainsi devenir l'atout majeur des intellectuels dans leur effort pour préserver un certain degré d'autonomie morale dans un État centré sur la personne du souverain.

The importance of biographies in the *Historical Records* (*Shiji* 史記) is undeniable. Suffice it to mention that they occupy around 40% of the text's volume and over one half of its chapters. Nor is it debatable that this biographical focus was one of Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (*ca* 145–*ca* 86 BCE) major innovations.[2] Whereas the biographical genre itself was not invented *ex nihilo*, biographies in the *Shiji* are incomparably more prominent than in any earlier historical or quasi-historical text. The question to be asked is: what were Sima Qian's goals in dramatically promoting (if not outright inventing) this genre?

In a previous study, I tried to analyze the *Shiji* biographies from a religious point of view.[3] In what follows, I want to alter the angle of discussion to the realm of political thought. I argue that the prominence of biographies in the *Shiji* reflects a conscious — and highly successful — attempt by Sima Qian to gain control over the field of "commemorative immortality." I want to contextualize the *Shiji* within broader debates over the individual's "name" (fame, repute; *ming* 名) and suggest that commemoration in Sima Qian's biographies can be understood as reaction to the state's attempt to monopolize control over individual *ming*.

The essay is divided into four parts. I start with a brief exploration of pre-*Shiji* antecedents of biographies to highlight the *Shiji*'s novelty. Then I shift to the pre-imperial quest for a "name" and the evolution of the idea of fame, repute, and renown as one of the major assets of an accomplished man of service (*shi* 士). In the third section, I investigate the idea — largely associated with the texts of the *fa* tradition, *fajia* 法家 (sometimes translated as "Legalist") — that the state should possess a monopoly on *ming*. I then turn to Sima Qian's biographies, especially his much-discussed, lengthy personal digression in the "Biography of Boyi" ("Boyi liezhuan" 伯夷列傳), and analyze his turn to the biographical genre as a conscious attempt to allow the literati to regain control over *ming* outside the state-mandated system of values. I conclude with a few observations about the import of Sima Qian's historiographic revolution on the balance of power between the throne and the literati in China's long imperial history.

1. Antecedents to *Shiji* Biographies

When did the biographical genre start in China? When did an individual's life and deeds become the focus of historical narratives? The answer to this question is not simple.[4] Neither the *Zuo Tradition* (*Zuo zhuan* 左傳), China's earliest surviving

2 I refer throughout to the *Shiji* as Sima Qian's creation for heuristic purposes only; it is difficult to assess how much of the text's design is indebted to Sima Qian's father, Tan 司馬談 (d. 110 BCE). See also the essays by Xu Jianwei and Kuang Yantao, and by Dorothee Schaab-Hanke in this volume.

3 Pines, "Chinese History-Writing between the Sacred and the Secular."

4 Li Wai-yee raises the possibility that the biographical genre first appeared in the now lost

narrative history, nor the parallel collection of anecdotes, the *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu* 國語), take an individual's deeds as the framework for organizing their materials. If anything, these texts are more concerned with the fate of major lineages and polities. This said, several individuals are covered in the *Zuo Tradition* (and, less so, in the *Discourses of the States*) thickly enough to consider these depictions as antecedents of future biographies. The immediate examples are the two most colorful (and powerful) rulers in the *Zuo Tradition* — Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公 (r. 636–628 BCE), and King Ling of Chu 楚靈王 (r. 540–529 BCE). I shall skip these examples, though, because the ruler-focused narrative does not belong to the biographical genre *sensu stricto*. What is interesting in the *Zuo Tradition* is the presence of a quasi-biographical format in depicting the lives of a few individuals of lesser ranks.

There are three cases which I identify as "proto-biographies" scattered in the *Zuo Tradition* — the instances of Zichan 子產 (d. 522 BCE) of Zheng 鄭, Yan Ying 晏嬰 (d. after 515 BCE) of Qi 齊, and Wu Zixu 伍子胥 (d. 484 BCE) of Chu 楚 (later Wu 吳). All three appear first in the narrative as youngsters; their complex careers are then followed with great attention until their deaths.[5] Furthermore, the three are invariably depicted with utmost sympathy. Of the three figures, the treatment of Zichan is the most interesting. The narrative follows his life in extraordinary detail — from his first appearance as a prescient youth scolded by his father[6] through his rise to the top of Zheng government, his domestic reforms and diplomatic acumen, to his death, commemorated by no less a figure than Confucius himself.[7] Yet what is most remarkable about this thick coverage is that immediately after Zichan's death, the narration of Zheng's history becomes incomparably sketchier than before. It would not be unreasonable to surmise that the *Zuo Tradition*'s exceptional interest in Zheng's domestic affairs, starting with the generation of Zichan's father and ending immediately with Zichan's death, may be related to the text's strong interest in Zichan's personality. The fact that Zichan — unlike most other persons in the *Zuo Tradition* — is depicted invariably as an unerring and prescient leader lends further credibility to this guess. If so, we may cautiously surmise that Zichan's life

late Warring States compilation, the *Origins of Generations* (*Shiben* 世本); see her "The Idea of Authority in the *Shiji*," pp. 378–379, n. 55. Cf. Twitchett, "Chinese Biographical Writings," p. 96.

5 The only exception is Yan Ying, whose personal life gains less attention than his model speeches. Five of these speeches — including some of the longest and ideologically most sophisticated speeches in the entire *Zuo Tradition* — are attached to the narratives of Duke Zhao (Zhao gong 昭公), 20th and 26th years (*Zuo zhuan*, "Zhao gong," 20.6, 20.8a, 20.8b; 26.10; 26.11; hereafter, all *Zuo zhuan* citations are based on the divisions adopted in Durrant, Li and Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition*, based on the *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhu*). Thereafter, Yan Ying disappears from the text. Sima Qian (SJ, 32.1505) places Yan Ying's death under the year 500 BCE, that is, full fifteen years after the statesman's disappearance from the *Zuo zhuan*'s narrative.

6 *Zuo zhuan*, "Xiang gong" 襄公, 8.3.

7 *Zuo zhuan*, "Zhao gong," 20.9.

provided the compilers of the *Zuo Tradition* with the organizing framework for their discussion of Zheng's history.[8]

When we move to the Warring States (Zhanguo 戰國, 453–221 BCE) period, we enter the age in which individuals rather than lineages become the makers of history. It could be expected that they would also become the major objects of history writing. Nonetheless, we do not have unequivocal evidence for the appearance of biographies. The closest parallel to these are series of anecdotes currently assembled in the *Stratagems of the Warring States* (*Zhanguo ce* 戰國策) that revolve around a single personality. These series were duly incorporated in many of Sima Qian's biographies, and it is entirely reasonable to assume that such biographies were composed back in the Warring States period, becoming the source materials for the future *Stratagems of the Warring States* and *Shiji*. The clearest cases are lengthy accounts of assassin-retainers, such as Yu Rang 豫讓 (d. before 442 BCE), Nie Zheng 聶政 (d. *ca* 397 BCE), and Jing Ke 荊軻 (d. 227 BCE), which were fully incorporated into their collective biography in the *Shiji*. Another notable case is a series of anecdotes that closely follow the career of a few remarkable statesmen, such as Fan Sui 范雎 or Fan Ju 雎 (d. 255 BCE). Or take for instance the most famous of roving persuaders, Su Qin 蘇秦 (d. 284 BCE): the first — and longest — anecdote about him, incorporated now in the Qin section of the *Stratagems of the Warring States*,[9] provides the crucial backdrop against which Su's later actions should be understood. We learn of Su Qin's personal background, of his failed attempt to endear himself to the king of Qin, of his determination to avenge humiliation at Qin by forging the anti-Qin alliance, and of his subsequent success. The story is clearly designed as an introduction to his career and was probably meant from the beginning to serve as a framework for Su's biography.

The above survey, even if brief, suffices to suggest that the seeds of *Shiji* biographies were sown back in the Warring States period, if not earlier. Yet it is remarkable that none of these early biographies *qua* biographies survived in either received or recently discovered texts. There is no evidence of systematic biographical writing, of the individual life becoming the primary organizing principle of a historical work, or of any other observable matching of a historical text with a single person's life. All these will become evident only in the *Shiji*. I believe therefore that we are justified to consider Sima Qian's usage of biography truly revolutionary.

8 For a strong coincidence between the thickness of coverage of Zheng's affairs in the *Zuo zhuan* and Zichan's lifetime, see the "Zheng annals" section in the appendix to Durrant, "The Problem of 'Other Annals' Embedded in *Zuozhuan*." For discussions of the figure of Zichan in the *Zuo zhuan*, see Zhang Hengshou, "Lun Zichan de zhengzhi gaige he tiandao, minben sixiang"; Martin, "Le cas Zichan"; Pines, "The Search for Stability," pp. 31–42.

9 *Zhanguo ce*, 3.2 ("Qin" 秦, 1).

2. The Quest for a Name: Bottom-up Approach

In an earlier study, I focused on the quest for a name as a major factor in social, ethical, and political life of the Warring States period.[10] Here I shall summarize my main findings, expand some of them, and explain how they are related to Sima's major enterprise. We should start with getting the terms right. What is in a name? What does *ming* mean?

The word *ming* 名 is one of the most multi-faceted terms in Chinese political, ethical, social, philosophical, and religious discourse. Even its most immediate literal meaning as an individual's appellation is imbued with social, political, and religious significance: one's name was a tabooed word for the person's inferiors, and its usage was closely related to questions of social and political hierarchy.[11] The second semantic layer, the one on which my current discussion will focus, is that of repute, renown, fame. Closely related to this is the notion of *ming* as commemoration, which will be discussed below as well. Third, and to a certain extent related to one's repute, was the meaning of *ming* as a designation of one's social status, which also will be addressed in what follows. The fourth semantic layer refers to *ming* as a *terminus technicus* in administrative and legal discourse.[12] Add to these the fifth, philosophical, meaning of *ming* as "word" or "term" (by far the most commonly discussed usage).[13] Moreover, distinct semantic layers of the term *ming* interact, further complicating discussion of its meaning. Yet in the context of the current study, I shall focus primarily on the interrelated quest for *ming* as reputation, social status, and posthumous fame — and outline how this quest and the debates about *ming* influenced the emergence of the biographical genre in the *Shiji*.

The quest for a name is one of the notable novelties of the Warring States period. During the preceding aristocratic Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu 春秋) period (770–453 BCE), the age covered in the *Zuo Tradition*, the interest in personal renown was limited. Whereas in the *Zuo Tradition* we can easily discern concern for one's "fine name" (*ling ming* 令名), nowhere does this concern appear to be a major factor determining an individual's action. Similarly, the quest for posthumous fame was still of limited import. This is exemplified in one of the most fascinating exchanges in the *Zuo Tradition*. In 549 BCE, a Jin 晉 leader, Fan Gai 范丐, asked a visiting Lu 魯 noble, Shusun Bao 叔孫豹, what it means "to die but not decay" (*si er bu xiu* 死而不朽). For Fan, this term referred to immortality of the lineage (his own pedigree going back to the legendary age of Emperor Yao 堯). Shusun Bao, by contrast, outlined three aspects of "not decaying" — namely "establishing virtue" (*li de* 立德), "establishing merits" (*li gong* 立功), and "establishing words" (*li yan* 立言).[14] All three are related to individual achievements, but the implications of the first two are more relevant to one's kin (presuming that "establishing virtue" refers to founding a polity, whereas "establishing merits" means founding a new aristocratic lineage).[15] Only "establishing words," that is, making politically and morally important pronouncements that would be transmitted to posterity (such as many exemplary speeches in the *Zuo Tradition* were), has a purely individual focus. Notably, even in the latter context as posthumous commemoration, the term *ming* does not appear to play any role. Nor was one's name an important social asset. In a pedigree-based society, gaining renown could not be meaningfully translated into the improvement of one's personal and family status.

In the Warring States period, this situation changed dramatically. The new meritocratic mood of "elevating the worthy" (*shang xian* 尚賢) allowed gifted individuals from outside the hereditary nobility to advance to the highest echelons of power. Although pedigree still mattered a lot, its overall importance became incomparably weaker than before. Yet with the expansion of opportunities came increased competition for lucrative positions in the service of competing rulers. For a lowly-born member of a *shi* stratum, entering political service was possible primarily through attracting the attention of a ruler or a chief minister. And to attract this attention one should possess fine reputation — a name — without which accessing political leaders would be much more difficult.

This backdrop explains the increased interest in attaining *ming* throughout the Warring States period. I shall not discuss here its most easily observable aspect, that is, the promise for the rulers that if they heed the thinker's advice they would attain simultaneously "achievements" (*gong* 功) and the "name" (*ming*). These promises, which permeate the texts from *Mo zi* 墨子 to *Xun zi* 荀子 to even several chapters of *Han Fei zi* 韓非子,[16] are only tangentially related to the more important trend — the search for renown from below. In what follows my focus will be the quest for a name by individual men of service, especially by "noble men" (*junzi* 君

10 Pines, "'To Die for the Sanctity of the Name.'"

11 See details in Adamek, *A Good Son Is Sad if He Hears the Name of His Father*; Cao, *Zhongguo gudai "ming" de zhengzhi sixiang yanjiu*, pp. 30–45.

12 See Makeham, "The Legalist Concept of *Hsing-ming*"; Indraccolo, "Philosophy of Language in the *fa* Tradition."

13 Discussions of this aspect of *ming* abound. For a sample, see, for example, Makeham, *Name and Actuality in Early Chinese Thought*; Solomon, *On the School of Names in Ancient China*; Cao, *Zhongguo gudai "ming" de zhengzhi sixiang yanjiu*.

14 *Zuo zhuan*, "Xiang gong," 24.1.

15 Pines, "'To Die for the Sanctity of the Name,'" pp. 174–175.

16 See, for instance, *Mo zi*, 12.121 ("Shang tong" 尚同, B); 9.218 ("Fei gong" 非攻, C); *Xun zi*, 9.152 ("Wang zhi" 王制), 11.216 ("Wang ba" 王霸), 14.263 ("Zhi shi" 致士), *et saepe*; *Han Fei zi*, 26–29, *passim*. Note that chapter 28 is plainly named "Achievements and the Name" ("Gong ming" 功名) and is dedicated in its entirety to the ruler's quest for both.

子). This issue was of particular interest to Confucius (Kong zi 孔子; 551–479 BCE) and his followers.

The precise attitude of Confucius to name-seeking has been debated for millennia. Certain statements in the *Analects* endorse the quest for a name as an entirely legitimate endeavor for a noble man, whereas others reiterate that such a quest can be legitimate only when it is subordinate to moral and ethical considerations.[17] Meng zi 孟子 (d. *ca* 304 BCE) seems to have been even less enthusiastic about the quest for a name.[18] By contrast, in *Xun zi* this quest becomes immensely important, and in what follows I shall focus primarily on Xun zi's (d. after 238 BCE) ideas.

Xun zi's views of name-seeking have two points of particular interest. First, the quest for a name is not just endorsed but is elevated to the position of supreme importance. Attaining a name is entirely dependent on one's own efforts and is not related to external circumstances. It is a true hallmark of one's achievements; it can compensate the noble man (and especially the best of the noble men — the Great *ru*, *da ru* 大儒) for failures in real life:

> 彼大儒者, 雖隱於窮閭漏屋, 無置錐之地, 而王公不能與之爭名; 用百里之地, 而千里之國莫能與之爭勝; 笞棰暴國, 齊一天下, 而莫能傾也. 是大儒之徵也. (…) 通則一天下, 窮則獨立貴名, 天不能死, 地不能埋, 桀、跖之世不能汙, 非大儒莫之能立.
>
> This Great Paragon, even when he lives in obscurity in an impoverished lane in a leaking house and has not enough space to place an awl, kings and dukes are unable to vie for a good name with him; when he has a territory of a hundred leagues squared, none of the states of one thousand leagues squared can vie for superiority with him. He beats down violent states, orders and unifies All-under-Heaven, and nobody is able to overturn him — this is the sign of the Great Paragon. (…) When he succeeds, he unifies All-under-Heaven; when he is impoverished, he establishes alone his noble name. Heaven cannot kill it; Earth cannot bury it; the age of [tyrant] Jie and [Robber] Zhi cannot tarnish it: only the Great Paragon can establish it like this.[19]

Here the "name" (i.e., good reputation) is posed as the supreme asset of the Great *ru*, the possession of which is a recompense for the lack of attainments in his real life. Obscure and impoverished, he is still able to contest successfully

17 See, for instance, the contrasting statements attributed to the Master in *Lunyu*, 15.19 and 15.20; see more in Makeham, "The *Analects* and Reputation"; Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, pp. 181–183; Pines, "'To Die for the Sanctity of the Name,'" pp. 176–177.

18 Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, p. 182. Cf. Pines, "'To Die for the Sanctity of the Name,'" pp. 178–179.

19 *Xun zi*, 8.117–118 ("Ru xiao" 儒效). In *Xun zi*, the term *ru* refers to exemplary persons, moral and political leaders. In chapter 8, the *da ru* is associated with the Duke of Zhou and Confucius himself, a person who deserves to be one of the closest associates of the Son of Heaven (*Xun zi*, 8.145).

with self-proclaimed kings of the Warring States and with other territorial lords, because his noble name is the source of enormous moral power. This name reaches cosmic dimensions: neither Heaven, nor Earth, nor human evildoers can tarnish it. Possessing a "noble name" is depicted in this extraordinary panegyric to the Great *ru* as coequal with the supreme political achievement of unifying All-under-Heaven, which was during the Warring States period the ultimate goal of competing thinkers.[20] In fact, Xun zi creates here two parallel hierarchies: one is crowned by real political achievements, and another one marked by the attainment of a "noble name."

The second notable point in *Xun zi* is that the glorious name cannot be sought through manipulations, such as "boastfulness" (*kuadan* 夸誕), "associating with partisans" (*bi zhou* 比周), or relying on one's "heavy position of authority" (*zhong shi* 重埶).[21] The name comes exclusively from self-cultivation according to the *ru* prescripts. The noble man does not value fake reputation, such as that of the notorious Robber Zhi 盜跖, "because it did not come from the midst of ritual and propriety."[22] Those men who seek reputation for the sake of reputation — for instance through display of excessive moral purism — are villains: "To steal a name is worse than stealing property."[23] Real renown is attainable exclusively through the path of morality:

> 故君子者, 信矣, 而亦欲人之信己也; 忠矣, 而亦欲人之親己也; 脩正治辨矣, 而亦欲人之善己也. 慮之易知也, 行之易安也, 持之易立也. 成則必得其所好, 必不遇其所惡焉. 是故窮則不隱, 通則大明. 身死而名彌白.
>
> Thus, the noble man is trustworthy: and he also expects others to trust him. He is loyal: and he also expects others to be close to him. He cultivates his rectitude and puts in order his discriminative abilities: and he also expects others to be good to him. His thoughts are easy to understand, his behavior is easy to follow, what he adheres to is easy to establish. When he accomplishes [his goal], he is bound to attain whatever he is drawn to and is bound not to encounter whatever he detests. Therefore, even when he is impoverished, he is not obscure, and when he succeeds, he becomes greatly illustrious. His body may die, but his name will be ever radiant.[24]

The final lines of this passage add two important points to Xun zi's discussion of name-seeking. First, from the promise "even when he is impoverished, he is not obscure" we may infer that obscurity — that is, lack of a name — was more frightening for a noble man than economic hardship. And second, the last line implies

20 Pines, "'The One That Pervades the All' in Ancient Chinese Political Thought."

21 *Xun zi*, 8.127–128 ("Ru xiao").

22 然而君子不貴者, 非禮義之中也. *Xun zi*, 3.39 ("Bu gou" 不苟).

23 盜名不如盜貨. *Xun zi*, 3.52 ("Bu gou").

24 *Xun zi*, 4.61 ("Rong ru" 榮辱).

that attaining a noble name was a means of transcending death: compensation not just for immediate misfortune, but even for mortality itself. This idea that "his body may die, but his name will be ever radiant" is of direct importance to Sima Qian's project, as we shall see below.

Xun zi does not explore in depth the transcendent qualities of posthumous fame, although the same topic is touched on in a few other Confucian texts, such as the "Black Robes" ("Zi yi" 緇衣) chapter of the *Records of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記).[25] Yet the idea of "commemorative immortality" — meaning that a glorious name could be an adequate compensation for death itself — gained prominence in the world of the Warring States. It is most strongly pronounced in the stories of assassin-retainers, who were ready to sacrifice their life for the sake of their patron-friends, following the motto: "A man of service dies for the sake of the one who profoundly understands him" 士為知己者死.[26] As I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere, the real goal of such assassins as Yu Rang or Nie Zheng was not necessarily to attain a meaningful political achievement, but rather to immortalize their names through self-sacrifice. This suicidal name-seeking was duly criticized in such texts as *Lao zi* 老子 and *Zhuang zi* 莊子, but I shall not review this criticism here.[27] A more important question for the present discussion would be the mechanism of the name formation, be it either renown in one's life or posthumous fame.

On this point, our texts remain surprisingly muted. They clearly envision a sort of bottom-up process for attaining renown, unrelated to power considerations. We are often left with the impression of a vibrant trans-regional public opinion. *Zhuang zi* ridicules "the people who lift their heels and crane their necks, tell each other 'In such-and-such a place there is a worthy' and pack up provisions to seek him; thus inside they abandon their kin and outside leave the service of their lords" 民延頸舉踵曰 "某所有賢者," 贏糧而趣之, 則內棄其親而外去其主之事.[28] Although the text concludes that "this is the fault of the leader's fondness for knowledge" 則是上好知之過也, the impression is that the ensuing *Life of Brian*-like mayhem is not related, at least directly, to the ruler's courts. Unidentified worthies use their renown to attract followers outside the state-sponsored system of social and political values.

This impression of bottom-up process of name formation is supported elsewhere. Take for instance the aforementioned story of the famous assassin-retainer, Nie Zheng. According to the anecdote in the *Stratagems of the Warring States*, having successfully performed an assassination, Nie Zheng deformed himself (he gouged out his own eyes and cut off his own face) so as to die unrecognized and protect his patron and his kin. Then, however, Nie's sister intervened. She disclosed her brother's identity, saying "As my younger brother is supremely worthy, I cannot, for the sake of cherishing my body, allow my brother's name to be eradicated: it was not his intention!" 弟至賢, 不可愛妾之軀, 滅吾弟之名, 非弟意也.[29] Having disclosed the brother's identity, the sister killed herself near his body. The story ends with the unanimous praise for her heroic self-sacrifice:

> 晉、楚、齊、衛聞之曰: "非獨政之能, 乃其姊者, 以列女也. 聶政之所以名施於後世者, 其姊不避菹醢之誅, 以揚其名也."
>
> Having heard about this, [the people] in Jin, Chu, Qi, and Wei 衛 all said: "Not only was [Nie] Zheng an able person, his sister was also an exemplary woman. The reason why Nie Zheng's name is transmitted to later generations is that his sister was ready to endure the punishment of becoming mincemeat so as to extol her brother's name."[30]

The anecdote, needless to say, is self-referential: it serves precisely as a means of transmitting Nie Zheng's and his sister's names to later generations. Conceivably, it reflects a powerful public opinion among men of service (or among the broader population), which promoted the spirit of self-sacrifice displayed by valiant assassins and their kin. The negative political implications of this bottom-up reputation are easily discernible. After all, the story as told in the *Stratagems of the Warring States* does not provide any moral or political justification for the assassination of Nie Zheng's victim except for Nie's desire to repay lavish patronage of the man who hired him. The endorsement of assassins like Nie Zheng or Yu Rang (who was reportedly broadly mourned by the *shi* from the state of Zhao, whose leader he unsuccessfully tried to assassinate)[31] creates a problem not unlike that of the endorsement of terrorists in different modern political cultures. This understanding explains to us Xun zi's aforementioned invectives against "name-stealers."

The problem is that neither Xun zi himself nor his fellow Confucians offered any viable mechanism for the proper formation and dissemination of a noble man's glorious name. Xun zi was adamant that in the absence of a sage king on the throne, the task of fostering and leading the elite opinion should be performed by the "noble

25 "[The noble man] has substance behind his words and standards behind his actions; thus in life, he cannot be robbed of his will, and in death, he cannot be robbed of his [good] name" 言有物而行有格也; 是以生則不可奪志, 死則不可奪名 (*Liji*, 33.1330 ["Ziyi"]). For a parallel passage in the Guodian manuscript of "Ziyi," see Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, pp. 410–412.

26 *Zhanguo ce*, 18.4, p. 617 ("Zhao" 趙, 1).

27 See Pines, "'To Die for the Sanctity of the Name,'" pp. 189–193.

28 *Zhuang zi*, p. 262 ("Qu qie" 胠篋); translation modified from Graham, *Chuang-tzŭ*, p. 209.

29 *Zhanguo ce*, 27.22, p. 1035 ("Han" 韓, 2).

30 *Zhanguo ce*, 27.22, p. 1035 ("Han," 2). "Becoming mincemeat" was the due punishment for those related to Nie Zheng. Nie's sister would have been turned into mincemeat had she not killed herself.

31 "On the day of [Yu Rang's] death, the men of service of Zhao heard about it and all wept for him" 死之日, 趙國之士聞之, 皆為涕泣 (*Zhanguo ce*, 18.4, p. 618 ["Zhao," 1]).

man" or Great *ru* (the task which Xun zi evidently sought for himself).[32] But this was a desideratum only. Xun zi offered no practical means that would prevent publicity being hijacked by "name-stealers." This failure explains why, among the critics of unruly public opinion, we encounter those who considered the state as the singularly appropriate regulator of one's "name."

3. The Quest for a Name: Top-down Approach

Their ideological differences aside, most of the Warring States-period texts display a common understanding: the quest for a name is a powerful factor that shapes the life of men of service. Whereas some endorsed this quest (with various degrees of enthusiasm) and others ridiculed it, a powerful third voice emerged. Certain thinkers began pondering how to utilize the quest for a name to promote desirable political, social, or ideological goals. Mo zi was in all likelihood the first to identify this potential. In his promulgation of the controversial ideal of "universal love" (or "caring for everyone," *jian ai* 兼愛), Mo zi reminded the rulers that they are able to direct people even to "kill themselves for the sake of a name" 殺身而為名; so, naturally, it would be easier to encourage subjects to engage in such a beneficial way of life as caring for everyone.[33] Yet this idea was never developed in full in *Mo zi*. By contrast, in the *Book of Lord Shang* (*Shang jun shu* 商君書) associated with Shang Yang 商鞅 (d. 338 BCE), the state's control of the "name" becomes the cornerstone of a new social order.

The *Book of Lord Shang* postulates that individuals are selfish, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. It is precisely the selfishness of individuals and their covetous inborn nature (*xing* 性) that can be utilized so as not to jeopardize, but rather to strengthen, political order. The authors explain:

> 民之性, 饑而求食, 勞而求佚, 苦則索樂, 辱則求榮, 此民之情也. 民之求利, 失禮之法; 求名, 失性之常. 奚以論其然也? 今夫盜賊上犯君上之所禁, 下失臣子之禮, 故名辱而身危, 猶不止者, 利也. 其上世之士, 衣不煖膚, 食不滿腸, 苦其志意, 勞其四肢, 傷其五臟, 而益裕廣耳, 非性之常, 而為之者, 名也. 故曰: 名利之所湊, 則民道之.
>
> The nature of the people is to seek food when they are hungry, to seek respite when they work hard, to seek joy when they are embittered, to seek glory when they are humiliated: this is the people's disposition. In seeking benefit, the people lose the standard of ritual,[34] in seeking a name (repute), they lose the constant of their nature.[35] How can I demonstrate this? Now, criminals violate the prohibitions of rulers and superiors above, and lose the ritual of subjects and sons below; hence their name is dishonored and their body endangered, but they still do not stop: this is because of benefit. In the generations of old, there were men of service who did not have enough clothes to warm their skin, nor enough food to fill their bellies. They exerted their four limbs and injured their five internal organs, but behaved ever more broad-heartedly: this is not the constant of their nature, yet they did it because of a [good] name. Hence it is said: wherever the name and benefit meet, the people will go in this direction.[36]

This discussion is one of the earliest systematic analyses of human nature in Chinese history. Two major factors influencing human behavior are the quest for riches and the quest for a name. The first causes the people to transgress against moral and legal norms; the second even transcends their quest for life and causes them to endanger themselves. Yet while the "name" here may refer to a transcendent force that causes the people to sacrifice their bodily wellbeing, this usage is of secondary importance in the *Book of Lord Shang*. Generally, the text equates "name" as fame and repute with "name" as social status. In the final analysis, the quest for a name is the quest for social prestige and the ensuing social and economic benefits. Shang Yang considers this quest entirely legitimate as long as it is realizable exclusively through the routes approved by the state, namely agriculture and warfare. The historical Shang Yang famously replaced the aristocratic social order with the new one based on the ranks of merit.[37] These ranks — and the adjacent social, economic, political, and even sumptuary privileges — were bestowed by the ruler on meritorious soldiers and diligent tillers. The *Book of Lord Shang* explains how this system should turn the quest for a name into the foundation of social order:

> 主操名利之柄, 而能致功名者, 數也. (…) 夫農, 民之所苦; 而戰, 民之所危也. 犯其所苦, 行其所危者, 計也. 故民生則計利, 死則慮名. 名利之所出, 不可不審也. 利出於地, 則民盡力; 名出於戰, 則民致死.
>
> When the sovereign holds the handles of a [good] name and benefit and is able to bring together the name [only] to the meritorious, this is the method. (…) Farming

32 *Xun zi*, 22, p. 422 ("Zheng ming" 正名): "Now, as the sage monarchs have passed away, All-under-Heaven is in turmoil, and vile speech is arising. A noble man has neither positional power to control it, nor punitive means to prohibit it, hence he uses argumentative persuasions [to confront it]" 今聖王沒, 天下亂, 姦言起, 君子無埶以臨之, 無刑以禁之, 故辨說也 (for translation, cf. Hutton, *Xunzi*, p. 240).

33 *Mo zi*, 15.160 ("Jian ai," B).

34 The combination *li zhi fa* 禮之法 ("standard of ritual") is peculiar to the *Book of Lord Shang*. Here, it implies the essential norms of behavior embedded in the broader concept of ritual.

35 The "constant of one's nature" (*xing zhi chang* 性之常) refers here to the fear of death. In seeking a name, the people are ready to sacrifice their lives.

36 Pines, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 6.4; *Shang jun shu*, p. 94 ("Suan di" 算地).

37 The system of ranks of merit has been studied intensively in China, Japan, and the West, especially since new paleographic discoveries have clarified aspects of its functioning and the magnitude of its social impact. I discuss this system in the context of the ideology of the *Book of Lord Shang* in Pines, "Social Engineering in Early China," pp. 17–24 (which also gives further references).

is what the people consider a hardship; war is what the people consider dangerous. Yet they brave what they consider a hardship and perform what they consider dangerous because of the calculation [of a name and benefit]. Thus, in [ordinary] life, the people calculate benefits; [facing] death, they think of a (good) name. One cannot but investigate whence the name and benefit come. When benefits come from land, the people fully utilize their strength; when the name comes from war, the people are ready to die.[38]

The idea that "the name comes from war" refers to Shang Yang's policies of granting ranks primarily (or exclusively) for merit attained on the battlefield.[39] Yet the point is not only to bestow ranks on meritorious soldiers (or, elsewhere, diligent tillers), but also to prevent the people from attaining a "name" outside the state-mandated rank system. This understanding forms the backdrop of the *Book of Lord Shang*'s assault on privately gained reputation. When "those who have privately established a name are deemed illustrious" 私名顯之, this is "a licentious way" (*yin dao* 淫道). The text recommends the unification of "the gates of prominence and glory" 顯榮之門, preventing anybody outside the state-mandated system of ranks to enter these gates. Those "who do not fight but attain glory, who have no rank but are respected" 不戰而榮, 無爵而尊 are called "villains" (*jianmin* 姦民).[40] Glory, respect, renown — all should be inseparable from the ranks of merit bestowed by the state.

An instrumentalist approach to the quest for a name and its equation with the quest for social status in the *Book of Lord Shang* may appear simplistic, but Shang Yang's insight into the mechanics of human motivation was validated by the success of his reforms. The system of ranks of merits introduced by Shang Yang reshaped not just Qin's social structure but even social mores, becoming the major motivating force for Qin's soldiers. As soldiers knew that valiant fighting and cutting off enemy heads would bring about not just material but social, legal, and even political privileges, which in the case of death could be bequeathed to one's descendants, they exerted themselves, contributing to Qin's eventual supremacy. In retrospect, Shang Yang's reform, based as it was on the state's monopolization of both the sources of material wellbeing ("benefit") and social prestige ("name"), appears as a singularly successful — albeit morally dubious — experiment in social engineering.[41]

Shang Yang can be justifiably credited with inventing a system in which one's quest for a name could be translated into the state's political asset; but he — and other contributors to the *Book of Lord Shang* — paid only scant attention to the question of how undeserved renown gained outside the state-approved hierarchy is formed and disseminated.[42] The assault on the bottom-up practice of name formation is much stronger in *Han Fei zi*. A brilliant political analyst, Han Fei 韓非 (d. 233 BCE) was keenly aware of the power of intellectual discourse to distract power holders and derail a well-functioning political system. In particular, Han Fei realized that independent public opinion — forged by the selfish "scholars" (*xuezhe* 學者 or *xueshi* 學士), "students of texts" (*wenxue* 文學), "Confucians" (*ru* 儒), or "Confucians and Mohists" (*ru*-Mo 儒墨)[43] — should be tackled and suppressed for the sake of proper ruler-centered political order. As part of this proposed intellectual cleansing, Han Fei displayed considerable interest in the formation of undeserved reputation that allowed talkative and useless men of letters to ascend the political ladder.

One of the chapters that is specifically focused on intellectuals' ability to fabricate baseless reputation is chapter 47, "Eight Explanations" ("Ba shuo" 八說). The author enumerates different manifestations of selfish conduct, each of which is lavishly praised by "students of texts" and their ilk, and then reminds readers: "These eight are the selfish praises by ordinary men; they are the great defeat for the sovereign" 此八者, 匹夫之私譽, 人主之大敗也.[44] The chapter explains further:

匹夫有私便, 人主有公利. 不作而養足, 不仕而名顯, 此私便也; 息文學而明法度, 塞私便而一功勞, 此公利也.

Ordinary men have their private interests but the sovereign is concerned with common benefit. Not to work but to have enough to sustain oneself, not to serve but to have one's name illustrious — these are private interests. Stopping textual studies and clarifying laws and standards, blocking private interests and unifying merits and toil — that is the common benefit.[45]

Adherents of "textual studies" want to avoid bitter toil or government service and yet enjoy material and social benefits. To advance this selfish goal, these scholars create favorable reputations for their peers — making "one's name illustrious" — as an alternative to the state-sponsored system of the ranks of merit. This amounts to the formation of a parallel hierarchy of values, which, as Han Fei is quick to observe, erodes the foundations of the sociopolitical order:

38 Pines, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 6.5; *Shang jun shu*, p. 95 ("Suan di").

39 See more in Pines, "A 'Total War'?"

40 See respectively Pines, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 22.1 ("Wai nei" 外內), 6.10 ("Suan di"), and 18.6 ("Hua ce" 畫策); *Shang jun shu*, pp. 254, 103, and 216.

41 Pines, "Social Engineering in Early China."

42 For a major exception, see Pines, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 25.1; *Shang jun shu*, p. 271 ("Shen fa" 慎法).

43 The latter term may refer to "moralizers" in general rather than just followers of Confucius and Mencius (see Lee, "When 'Ru-Mo' May Not Be 'Confucians and Mohists'").

44 Harbsmeier, *Han Feizi*, 47.1 (from which I borrow subsequent translations of *Han Fei zi*); *Han Fei zi*, p. 1023 ("Ba shuo").

45 Harbsmeier, *Han Feizi*, 47.3; *Han Fei zi*, p. 1027 ("Ba shuo").

民之重名與其重賞也均. 賞者有誹焉, 不足以勸; 罰者有譽焉, 不足以禁. (…) 明主之道, 賞必出乎公利, 名必在乎為上.

The people attach the same importance to the name (repute) and rewards. If those who are rewarded are blamed by others, then [the rewards] will not suffice to encourage them; if those who are punished are praised by others, then [the punishments] will not suffice to prohibit [transgressions]. (…) The way of the clear-sighted sovereign is such that rewards inevitably derive from benefiting the common interest, and the name inevitably comes from acting for the superiors.[46]

Han Fei unpacks here a somewhat simplistic equation of the name as repute and as social status in the *Book of Lord Shang*. Reputation is of equal importance with rewards (which, recall, include rank enhancement and social promotion) in determining the people's behavior. Precisely because of that, praise and blame should not be determined by the adherents of textual studies or by Confucian "noble men." They should be meted out by the state and the state alone. Elsewhere, Han Fei depicts the dire results of unchecked reputation formation on the political system in its entirety. Chapter 45, "Deluded Assignments" ("Gui shi" 詭使), focuses on the dangers of fake reputation created by the self-declared "sages," the "knowledgeable," and the "worthy":

上無其道, 則智者有私詞, 賢者有私意. 上有私惠, 下有私欲. 聖智成群, 造言作辭, 以非法措於上. 上不禁塞, 又從而尊之, 是教下不聽上、不從法也. 是以賢者顯名而居, 姦人賴賞而富. 賢者顯名而居, 姦人賴賞而富, 是以上不勝下也.

When the superior lacks the way, the knowledgeable have selfish (private) words, and the worthies have selfish aspirations. When the superior has private generosity, the underlings have private (selfish) desires. "Sages" and "knowledgeable" multiply; they produce speeches and create statements in order to attack the standards being implemented from above. When the superior, instead of prohibiting and blocking them, follows and respects them, this is to teach the underlings neither to heed the superior, nor to follow the standards. Therefore, the "worthies" will rest on their illustrious name, and the villains will rely on rewards to become rich. When the "worthies" rest on their illustrious name, and the villains rely on rewards to become rich, this means that the superior cannot overcome his underlings.[47]

This extract serves as an excellent summary of Han Fei's views. The intellectuals are useless, but they yearn for the ruler's support. In order to maintain high sociopolitical position without contributing anything practical to the state, they promote an alternative system of values in which the reputation (name) generated by the men of learning competes with the state-ordained system of the ranks of merit. Dangerously, they succeed in convincing the ruler of the attractiveness of their values, which results in the erosion of the state's power. The intrinsic selfishness of these intellectuals coupled with the sophistication of their discourse deludes the ruler and the ruled, creating grave results. It benefits not just useless "worthies," but also allows malicious "villains" (*jianren* 姦人) to advance economically, jeopardizing the sociopolitical order in its entirety. This leads Han Fei to his well-known suggestion to suppress private learning. The "Five Vermins" ("Wu du" 五蠹) chapter clarifies:

故明主之國, 無書簡之文, 以法為教; 無先王之語, 以吏為師; 無私劍之捍, 以斬首為勇.

Accordingly, in the country of a clear-sighted sovereign there are no texts written on bamboo strips, but the law is the teaching; there are no discourses of the former monarchs, but officials are the teachers; there is no private wielding of swords, but beheading [enemies] is the valor.[48]

4. Sima Qian's Revolution

The events of the century that separates Han Fei from Sima Qian are too well known to merit a detailed discussion; a brief reminder will suffice. The short-lived Qin dynasty tried to implement the *fa* ("Legalist") thinkers' ideal of a total state that tightly controls society, including its intellectual life. The infamous Li Si's 李斯 (d. 208 BCE) biblioclasm of 213 BCE can be understood in light of the preceding discussion as an attempt to limit, among others, the possibilities of forming an alternative value system that would erode the state-mandated hierarchy. Elimination of historical and quasi-historical texts, notably the *Discourses of the Hundred Schools* (*Baijia yu* 百家語), probably a collection of historical anecdotes,[49] was an efficient way to deprive those whom the state did not consider deserving glory from attaining posthumous fame.

After the Qin was toppled by a popular uprising of unprecedented scale and ferocity, its heir, the Han, had to retreat from some of Qin's practices, amid overall continuity of Qin's system. Gradually, however, the changes became more substantial. Qin's system of the ranks of merit started dying away; the idea of turning the entire population into tillers-cum-soldiers was losing its relevance; and new foci of political concern emerged, particularly the need to redefine the relations between the imperial center and the newly emerging local elites. By the time of Sima Qian, these changes brought about, among other things, a new system of promotion in which the individual's filiality and incorruptibility (*xiaolian* 孝廉) merited more than military achievements in determining one's status. The new system lacked the comprehensiveness of Shang Yang's, but its impact on social mores was undeniable.

46 Harbsmeier, *Han Feizi*, 48.7; *Han Fei zi*, p. 1079 ("Ba jing" 八經).

47 Harbsmeier, *Han Feizi*, 45.6; *Han Fei zi*, p. 998 ("Gui shi").

48 Harbsmeier, *Han Feizi*, 49.13; *Han Fei zi*, p. 1112 ("Wu du").

49 Petersen, "Which Books *Did* the First Emperor of Ch'in Burn?"

Being the major source of social prestige, the court could continue the program of social engineering under new circumstances and with new goals.

It is against this backdrop that we can understand the revolutionary impact of Sima Qian's biographies. Sima Qian clarifies why he decided to give the genre prominence in the first of these biographies — the "Biography of Boyi." Having narrated with remarkable brevity the miserable fate of two righteous hermits — Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊 — Sima Qian starts his famous monologue in which he reflects upon the historian's tasks and upon the importance of commemoration of outstanding personalities.[50]

Boyi and Shuqi, two morally impeccable persons who died of starvation, cause Sima Qian to question Heaven's justice in general. By providing examples of righteous men, like Confucius' disciple Yan Yuan 顏淵, who died prematurely, and of arch-villains, like Robber Zhi 盜跖 (here written as 盜蹠), who enjoyed a good life, Sima Qian asks in despair: "So, what is called 'the Way of Heaven': is it right or is it wrong?" 儻所謂天道, 是邪非邪?[51] Questioning Heaven's justice and lamenting one's fate was a common *topos* in Warring States discourse, the prevalent answer being that the noble man should cultivate his virtue whatever the external circumstances.[52] Sima Qian alludes to this solution, but then provides an additional way of coping with injustice:

> "君子疾沒世而名不稱焉." 賈子曰: "貪夫徇財, 烈士徇名, 夸者死權, 眾庶馮生." "同明相照, 同類相求." "雲從龍, 風從虎, 聖人作而萬物睹." 伯夷、叔齊雖賢, 得夫子而名益彰. 顏淵雖篤學, 附驥尾而行益顯. 巖穴之士, 趣舍有時若此, 類名堙滅而不稱, 悲夫! 閭巷之人, 欲砥行立名者, 非附青雲之士, 惡能施于後世哉?
>
> [Confucius said:] "The noble man is pained if, by the end of his life, his name is not mentioned." Master Jia[53] said: "Covetous men seek wealth; zealous men of service seek name; the boastful die of expediency; the masses cling to life." [The *Changes* (*Yi* 易) say:] "Those of identical light illuminate each other; those of identical kind seek each other." [It also says:] "Clouds follow the dragon; wind follows the tiger; the sage rises and myriad creatures eye him." Although Boyi and Shuqi were worthy, it was because they attained the Master (Confucius) that their name became ever more splendid. Although Yan Yuan studied industriously, it was because he attached himself to the tail of a thoroughbred (Confucius) that his conduct became more illustrious. There are men of service in rocky caves who approach and reject [a position] in a timely [manner]; how sad it is that their name will perish like smoke and not be mentioned! The men from village gates and lanes who want to behave steadfastly to establish their names — how will they carry it to the later generations unless attached to a towering man of service?[54]

This extraordinarily rich passage allows more than one interpretation. In a previous study I analyzed it through the category of religious thought: commemorative immortality is offered here as a compensation for Heaven's injustice. In Durrant's words, "the historian thereby becomes the savior, those attached to him are saved, living on through the power of his writing brush."[55] Indeed, by preserving one's name for posterity, the historian corrects Heaven's wrongdoing, providing immortality for those who failed to fulfill their aspirations in life. An after-life in a historical text becomes a compensation for under-appreciation or failure in life.[56]

But let us shift the focus back to the debates about the quest for a name. Clearly this quest stands at the heart of Sima Qian's passage cited above; suffice it to note that in the short passage the term "name" (*ming*) occurs no fewer than five times (and is implied in the discussion of Yan Yuan as well). Sima Qian follows the common conviction of the Warring States-period thinkers: the quest for a name is an extraordinarily important, maybe the crucial, motivating force for an aspiring *shi*. Yet Sima Qian focuses not on this quest as such, but rather on the question of how this name is formed and preserved. Recall that supporters of bottom-up commemoration failed to address this question. And here comes the historian: it is through Confucius' acting as a quasi-historian that the names of Boyi and Shuqi, as well as Yan Yuan, were preserved for posterity. And it is through the current Confucius (or at the very least a lofty man of service) — Sima Qian — that new generations of morally upright persons could be assured that, despite all the odds, their names will not "perish like smoke."[57]

Sima Qian's assigning the historian with the task to confirm one's name

50 For a brilliant discussion of this chapter, see Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror*, pp. 20–27; see also Shan, "'Boyi liezhuan' zhong de gongzheng linian he yongheng linian."

51 SJ, 61.2125.

52 This issue is discussed in numerous texts, the paradigmatic one being the "Qiong da yi shi" 窮達以時 ("Failure and Success Depend on Timing") manuscript from Tomb 1, Guodian 郭店 (discussed in Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, pp. 429–464).

53 Jia Yi 賈誼 (*ca* 200–168 BCE).

54 SJ, 61.2127

55 Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror*, p. 25.

56 See more in Pines, "Chinese History-Writing between the Sacred and the Secular," pp. 333–340.

57 This understanding of Sima Qian's mission in composing the biographical chapters was emphasized by Sima Zhen 司馬貞 (679–732) in his comment on Sima Qian's explanation about why he created the "Biographies" section. The original statement says: "Upholding righteousness, outstanding and unconventional, they did not allow themselves to miss opportunities, and established merit and made a name for themselves in the world: [about such people,] I have made the seventy 'Biographies'" 扶義俶儻, 不令己失時, 立功名於天下, 作七十列傳 (SJ, 130.3319; translation borrowed from Luca, "Self-inscriptions," p. 169). Sima Zhen comments on *bu ling ji shi shi* 不令己失時 as referring to the ability of outstanding and unconventional *shi* to establish merit and make a name in their generation only, whereas they fail to transmit it to posterity. It is implied that here Sima Qian comes to help (SJ, 130.3320, n. 9).

was a stroke of genius. First, it offered an elegant solution to the problem outlined with the greatest clarity in the *Xun zi* passages cited above. Xun zi was aware of the impossibility of many "Great *ru*," himself included, to fully realize their potential, and promised to compensate them with a noble name that would not be either destroyed by Heaven and Earth or tarnished by malevolent humans. Yet Xun zi did not clarify how this name would be formed and transmitted to future generations. Sima Qian resolved the problem. By recording people's deeds in his *Shiji* which, though materially perishable, proved to be indestructible, Sima Qian realized Xun zi's dream. Immortality enshrined in a historical text became more vivid than any other form of commemoration. Soon thereafter, the biographical genre started proliferating rapidly, eventually becoming the core of history writing. Not incidentally, the lion's share of historical texts recorded in the bibliographic section of the *History of the Sui* (*Sui shu* 隋書) consisted of biographies.[58]

Second, Sima Qian's experiment with biographies not only reshaped the nature of historical works for millennia to come, but also further contributed toward renewed interest in history writing. Aside from many other political and social usages, historiography henceforth became firmly associated with a means to redress Heaven's and men's injustice. From now on, participants in historical spectacles — be these audacious assassin-retainers, brave remonstrators, or zealous purists who preferred death to filthy service — could rest assured that they would die but never decay. This understanding was brilliantly summarized eight centuries after Sima Qian by one of China's most perceptive historical critics, Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721):

> 夫人寓形天地, 其生也若蜉蝣之在世, 如白駒之過隙, 發端庸淺. 猶且恥當年而功不立, 疾沒世而名不聞. 上起帝王, 下窮匹庶, 近則朝廷之士, 遠則山林之客, 諒其於功也、名也, 莫不汲汲焉, 孜孜焉. 夫如是者何哉? 皆以圖不朽之事也. 何者而稱不朽乎? 蓋書名竹帛而已.
>
> As a human finds refuge between Heaven and Earth, his life is as short as that of a mayfly, or like a white colt's passing a crevice — its starting point is mediocre and shallow. In any case, he is ashamed that, even at his prime, he has failed to establish merit, and by the time of his demise, he has failed to make his name well known.[59] From sovereigns above to commoners below, from the men of service who stay close to the courts to the farthest sojourners in mountains and forests — everybody anxiously and incessantly thinks about merit and the name. Why is this? Because everybody thinks of how to avoid "decaying." What is called "not decaying"? It is to have the name recorded on bamboo and silk, and that is all.[60]

58 Durrant, "From 'Scribe' to 'History,'" p. 102.

59 A reference to *Lunyu*, 15.20, cited also in Sima Qian's passage above.

60 *Shitong*, 11.1, p. 303 ("Shiguan jian zhi" 史官建置).

Liu Zhiji's passage reflects a consensus that crystallized in the aftermath of Sima Qian's magnum opus. One's immortality ("not decaying") is attainable primarily in a historical text. According to Liu Zhiji, the very formation of scribal offices in the past came to respond to the people's existential angst. Being recorded on bamboo and silk saves mortals from oblivion and makes their life meaningful. While we may disagree with this historical conjecture, what is undeniable is that, ever after Sima Qian, this association of history writing and ensuring the outstanding people that they will avoid "decaying" became the norm.

Third, and finally, we should turn to the political implications of Sima Qian's "biographical revolution." The proliferation of historical commemoration altered the balance of power between the state and the educated elite. It effectively undermined the top-down vision according to which the state alone should control one's "name." Simultaneously, however, Sima Qian avoided some of the pitfalls of the bottom-up approach. From the political establishment's point of view, a historian — especially a court historian, who was after all the emperor's employee — was a more acceptable figure to guard the gates to posthumous fame than amorphic and unruly "public" (that is, literati) opinion. And yet, a historian was not the court's propagandist either. Most historians tended to write on behalf of broader concerns of the educated elite rather than on behalf of narrow court agendas. This means that one's posthumous repute was in the final analysis determined by peers, not by rulers. The state remained an important source of social prestige, but it was no longer the exclusive determinant of a person's *ming*.

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CHAPTER 2

BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN THE *HISTORICAL RECORDS*: IMITATION OF CLASSICS AND NARRATIVE OF THE HUNDRED SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Lives are not the only concern of the Simas' biographical writing. Seen from a holistic perspective, biographical writing in the *Historical Records* implicitly conveys the Simas' overall understanding of human history and summarizes China's intellectual past. This results from their two working principles: consulting the Six Classics for reliability, and composing biographies for masters with transmitted treatises. From this viewpoint, these writings can be divided into two categories: first, the "Basic Annals" and "Hereditary Houses" for emperors and feudatories; and second, the "Biographies" for intellectual figures. The former category is arranged in a canon-commentary order and sets the starting and ending points of history by imitating the Six Classics and their exegetical apparatus. The historical characters appearing successively in this category serve to shape the reader's perception of a parabola of dynastic rise and fall, which in turn is determined by the morality of historical actors and unfolds as a linear succession of reigns. As for the latter category, the Simas, putting aside the Classics, mainly composed biographies of masters whose treatises had been transmitted and prevailed in Han times, functioning as representatives of intellectual history.