**ARCHIVE PICK** 

Sima Qian: Records of the Grand Historian

## History is supposedly written by the victors. Sima Qian, author of China's original historical classic, showed it could also be written by the condemned.

**JEREMIAH JENNE** — SEPTEMBER 9, 2025

**HISTORY** 

→ he year is 99 все. Sima Qian (司马迁) is an official record-keeper in the court of the

Emperor Han Wudi, one of the most famous rulers of the Han Dynasty. The emperor is

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furious that General Li Ling, a friend of Sima Qian, has defected to the Xiongnu, the horseback-riding nomadic enemies of the Han. Unable to punish the absent commander, the emperor proposes executing the general's family members instead. Sima Qian speaks out in defense of his friend, so the emperor's ire turns toward him. Han Wudi orders Sima Qian to be executed for having the temerity to criticize the throne, but Sima Qian begs to be castrated instead as a way of commuting his death sentence. Sima Qian

6

66 A man has only one death. That death may be as weighty as Mount Tai, or it may be as light as a goose feather. It all depends upon the way he uses it. ... I grieve that I have things in my heart that I have

not been able to express fully, and I am ashamed to think that after I

At the time, Sima Qian was still years away from completing his masterpiece, an epic history of

China covering 2,500 years from the time of the mythical Yellow Emperor to his own era,

the <u>Shiji</u> (史记) or *Records of the Grand Historian*. And so the man who would one day be

am gone, my writings will not be known to posterity.

of dynastic rise and fall.

wrote to a friend, Ren An, about his dilemma:

considered China's greatest historian suffered unspeakable pain, mutilation and disgrace in order to finish his assignment. Sima Qian was born to do this job. His father, Sima Tan, held a similar position at court, and had laid the groundwork for what **RECORDS OF** THE GRAND HISTORIAN became the Shiji. For Sima Qian, finishing the Shiji was as much

sections that include chronologies, treatises and famous texts, genealogies and biographies. Making allowances for the terseness of classical Chinese writing, the Shiji contains roughly the same amount of information as Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War and the Old Testament combined. People often call Sima Qian the "Chinese Herodotus" — which is a bit like calling the director Zhang Yimou the "Chinese Spielberg." It's not entirely inaccurate, but it misses the point. Herodotus wrote history as ethnography and moral inquiry. Thucydides wrote it as political

about his father's legacy as his own. He completed it in 91 BCE,

though at first it only circulated among court scholars and elites.

needed to understand precedent, statecraft and the moral lessons

Gradually the Shiji became essential reading for officials who

The *Shiji* is more than a book: it is an immense compendium,

525,000 characters long, with 130 juan (chapters) divided into

TRANSLATED BY BURTON WATSON QIN DYNASTY A Renditions - Columbia University Press Book Buy the book >

Chinese historiography. Sima Qian imbued his narratives with the same deep sense of right and wrong that got him in trouble with the emperor. ima Qian was a historian's historian: a tireless collector of sources, traveling throughout the

empire, digging through local archives, sitting in libraries, sifting through imperial annals,

recording oral histories, legends and myths. As he gathered his material, he carefully evaluated

I myself have travelled west as far as K'ung-t'ung, north past Cho-lu,

east to the sea, and in the south I have sailed the Yellow and Huai

Rivers. The elders and old men of these various lands frequently

historical evidence and compared sources against each other:

realism. Sima Qian wrote it as statecraft — even soulcraft — and imbued his narratives with

the same deep sense of right and wrong that got him in trouble with the emperor. Rulers rise

wrote a history of his world down to the time he lived, and in so doing crafted the urtext for

and fall, human virtue flickers and fails, and amidst it all, Sima Qian is there keeping score. He

pointed out to me the places where the Yellow Emperor, Yao, and Shun had lived, and in these places the manners and customs seemed quite different. In general those of their accounts which do not differ from the ancient texts seem to be near to the truth.

Why should a modern reader choose to dive into such deep waters? Because like all great

many plot twists as the last season of *Love Island*. These biographies are divided into sub-

Shiji, renders with colorful titles such as "Wandering Knights," "Harsh Officials" and "The

Emperor's Male Favorites," featuring colorful historical vignettes:

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historians, Sima Qian balances his rigorous methodology with a storyteller's love of narrative

and character. The *Shiji* is full of richly drawn heroes and villains, with as much intrigue and as

categories that Burton Watson, translator of the most famous English-language version of the

Emperor Kao-tsu [Han Gaozu, founder of the Han Dynasty], for all

his coarseness and blunt manners, was won by the charms of a young boy named Chi. Chi ... [didn't have] any particular talent or ability; [but] won prominence simply by their looks and graces. ... As a result all the palace attendants at the court of Emperor Hui took to wearing caps with gaudy feathers and sashes of scarlet; and to painting their faces, transforming themselves into a veritable host of Chis. Like his Greco-Roman counterparts, Sima Qian is not afraid to spice up a story with some

Sima Qian's story-telling also helped to coin various Chinese sayings that are now commonly used. "Calling a deer a horse" (指 鹿为马, the deliberate peddling of falsehoods) derives from a treasonous official who gifted a deer to the emperor but called it a horse, as a test to see which other officials would join him in the

creative interpretation of the sources, or to take creative liberties by inventing dialogue. As any HBO executive will tell you, if you want to sell a story, add dragons, damsels and sex. Or even better, damsels having sex with dragons:

The mother of Kao-tsu was one day resting on the bank of a large

pond when she dreamed that she encountered a god. At this time the

sky grew dark and was filled with thunder and lightning. When Kao-

tsu's father went to look for her, he saw a scaly dragon over the place

where she was lying. After this she became pregnant and gave birth to

A portrait of Sima Qian in the National Palace Museum, Taiwan. (Wikicommons) collapsed as a result: 66

returned to defeat his captors. It's not all just fun with stories and clichés. The *Shiji* is a foundational text for understanding Chinese history and politics. Other writers, notably Mencius, had previously expounded on the Mandate of Heaven (the idea of a divine right to rule that could be lost as a result of misbehavior) but the Shiji abounds with examples of corrupt, venal or stupid rulers getting their cosmic comeuppance. Take King Zhou, the last king of the Shang Dynasty, which fell in 1046 всЕ. According to Sima Qian, King Zhou was a debauched nightmare and his dynasty He prided himself on surpassing his ministers in ability and considered himself superior to all under Heaven, believing that everyone was beneath him. He loved wine and debauchery, and was infatuated with women. He increased taxes to fill the treasury with

lie. "To break cauldrons and sink boats" (破釜沉舟, crossing the

Rubicon) comes from the warlord Xiang Yu, who destroyed his

army's cooking pots and boats after crossing a river, forcing them

to fight with no possibility of retreat. And "to sleep on brushwood

and taste gall"(卧薪尝胆, enduring hardship to achieve a goal)

humiliation as a captive, then slept on rough brushwood and

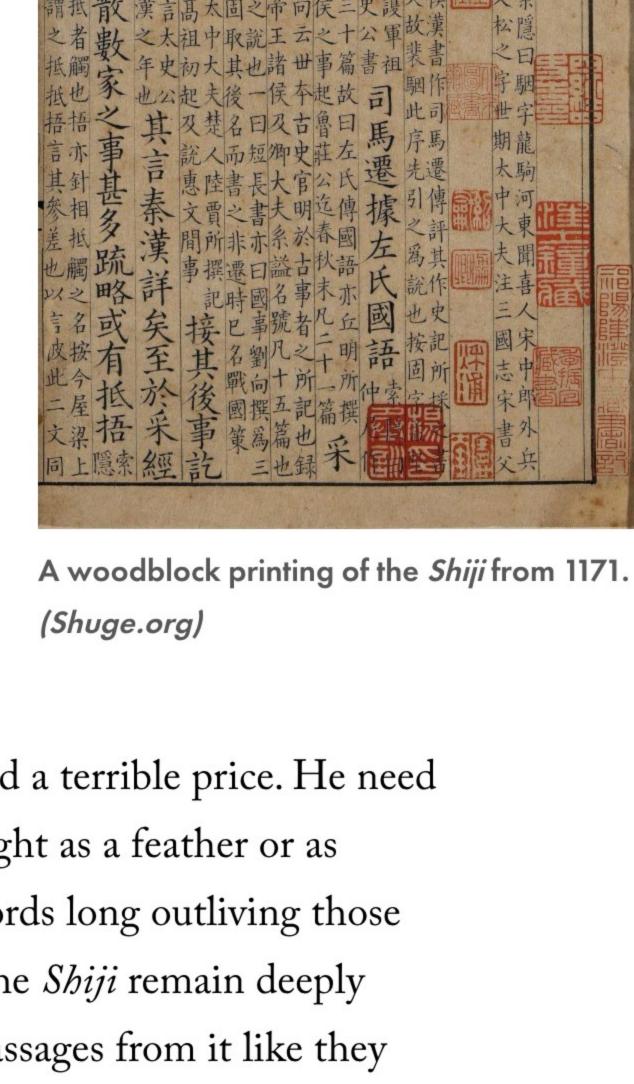
drank bitter gall daily to remind himself of his shame, until he

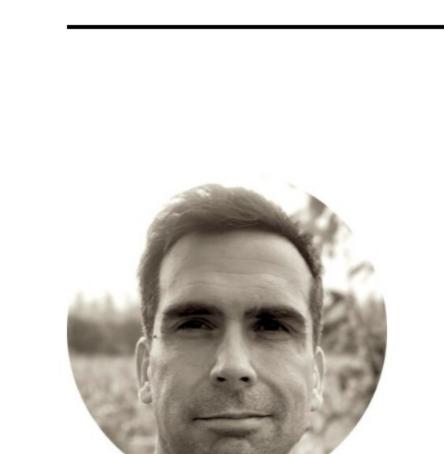
originates from the story of King Goujian, who endured years of

achievement. Sima Qian writes beautiful classical Chinese in a style that has challenged translators for centuries. The stories are lively, didactic and entertaining. Nevertheless, reading the Shiji in its entirety is probably not feasible for most readers, especially as the complete text has yet to be translated into English. Burton Watson's translation, first published in 1961, cherry-picks the chapters and takes liberties with fidelity to its source in the service of telling a good story. It was re-released in 1993 in a revised edition with three volumes, which might not seem like an abridgment, but they only cover about 90 of the 130 original chapters. There is also an unfinished nine-volume <u>translation</u> by William Nienhauser that emphasizes fidelity to Sima Qian's original text over readability or accessibility, with copious

Most importantly for modern readers, the *Shiji* is a literary

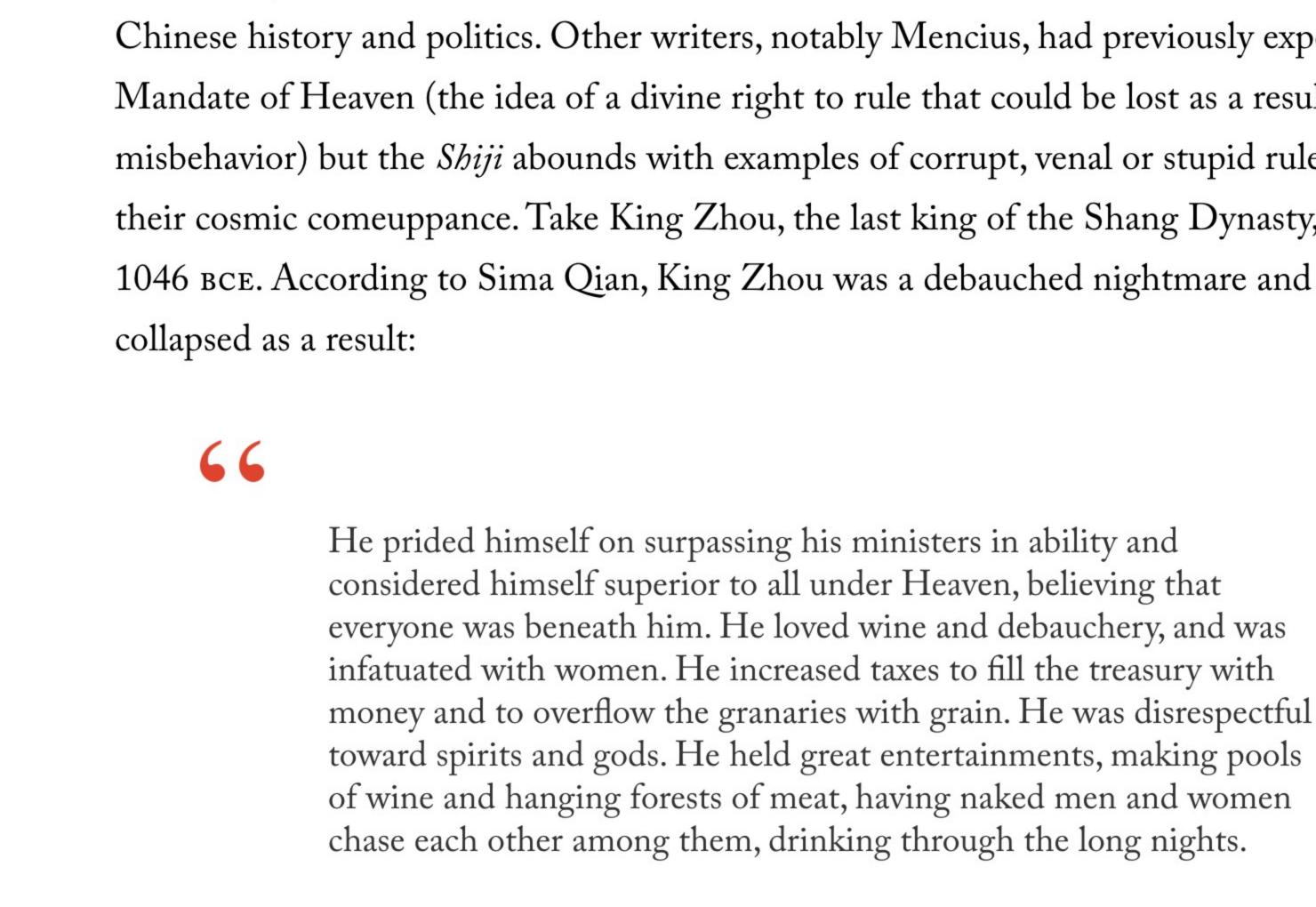
Why should we continue to read the *Shiji* today? Because in an era when telling stories of the past requires both skill and courage, Sima Qian remains an icon of both. He spoke truth to power and paid a terrible price. He need not have worried about whether his impact on this world would be light as a feather or as heavy as a mountain. The Shiji continues to be read and matter, its words long outliving those who tried to silence the man who wrote them. The moral lessons of the *Shiji* remain deeply encoded in the DNA of Chinese culture, and many Chinese quote passages from it like they are reciting scripture. In an age of algorithmic amnesia and curated half-truths, The Records of the Grand Historian is a reminder that facts have legacies, and that historical writing when done with conviction can be a form of immortality, no matter the cost. ■





footnotes and thoroughness.

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Kao-tsu.