

## Linking Ancient and Contemporary

Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literature

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# Bai Shouyi on Sima Qian and Ban Gu

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**Abstract** This article discusses a paper by the renowned contemporary Chinese historian Bai Shouyi written shortly before the so-called Cultural Revolution. Bai Shouyi's text deals with the differences between the views of the two Han historians Sima Qian and Ban Gu, at first sight an apolitical subject. A closer look reveals that when writing this article, that appeared not only in a scholarly journal but also in the newspaper «People's Daily», Bai Shouyi's probably had in mind political issues of his own day. Thus, it turns out to be a famous article of the practice of «to use the past for the present» (*gu wei jin yong*).

**Keywords** Bai Shouyi. Sima Qian. Ban Gu. Gu wei jin yong.

There is one sentence in Chinese that has been important throughout Chinese history: *gu wei jin yong* 古為今用 «to use the past in order to serve the present». History writing in traditional and in contemporary China has always had a twofold interest: on the one hand, the Chinese tradition of writing standard histories (*zhengshi* 正史) has, over the centuries, established a very efficient tool for conserving aspects of the past for future generations. On the other hand, since ancient times it has relied on a 'mirror' metaphor to describe that the writing of history was not a goal in itself.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it was seen as a means that served the goal of teaching lessons from the past that were relevant to the present. It is therefore no coincidence that Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086) gave his monumental opus magnum the title A Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑). In this respect, Chinese tradition is similar to Roman tradition, which coined the term «*historia vitae magistra*». Another parallel may be found in the Western tradition of writing what has been termed *Fürstenspiegel*, or «mirror for princes», although these texts are not necessarily historical by nature.

What is peculiar about China is that scholars and historians here have continued to make use of the past in order to serve the present over most

1 The first historian to use this metaphor was Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145 or 135 BC-87? BC). See *Shiji* 史記 1959, 18.878.

of the 20th century, while historical theory in Western countries – successfully or not – has tried to free itself from this tendency. Examples may be seen in the reanimation of the Han dynasty Oldtext/Newtext controversy at the end of the 19th century (van Ess 1994, pp. 146-170), in the May 4th accounts of the scholar-literatus Qu Yuan 屈原 (Schneider 1980), and in the books by Wu Han 吳晗 (1909-1969) on the founder of the Ming dynasty, which were seen as judgments on Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石 (1887-1975) and Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893-1976), and which in the end may have led to the tragic death of Wu Han in 1969 (Wakeman 2009, p. 378; Farmer 1995, p. 7; Andrew, Rapp 2000, p. 29).

Many more examples could be enumerated. Sima Qian wrote a very important sentence in which he said that one of his main interests was «to penetrate the changes of the past and present» *tong gu jin zhi bian* 通古今之變 (*Hanshu* 1962, 62.2735). Many articles have been written in Chinese on this famous motto of Sima Qian's. It shows that for Chinese culture the subject, past and present is much more important than the average Western academic may realize. In the context of what has been said above, it should be interesting to look at one Chinese author who wrote an article that appeared in at least three different forms and in five different places on a subject that has received considerable attention in the long history of imperial China, namely the comparison of the *Records of the Chronicler* (*Shiji* 史記) and the *Documents of the Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書). The author is Bai Shouyi 白壽彝 (1909-2000), and the title of his article is «Sima Qian yu Ban Gu» 司馬遷與班固. What immediately attracts one's attention to this article is that, while it serves as a preface to a book on the *Shiji* that was published in 1982, there is a short comment, in brackets, telling us that it was first published in the January 23.1964 issue of *Renmin ribao* 人民日報.

This is not completely true. Actually, a longer version of the article had first come out in the fall/winter 1963 issue of the *Journal of Peking Normal University* (Beijing shifan daxue). Though actually a scholarly article, it was presented shortly afterwards to a much broader audience. This does not happen to many scholarly articles and so it seems important to find out what was so interesting in this article that it deserved to be published in *Renmin ribao*.<sup>2</sup>

Bai Shouyi begins both versions with some general information on Sima Qian and the *Shiji*, but this part is much shorter in the *Renmin ribao* than in the original version. The two versions resemble each other very closely in their second parts, which in the original is titled «The Characteristics of the Composition of the *Shiji*» 《史記》編寫上的特點. Here, Bai Shouyi moves on to tell his reader that the real importance of the *Shiji* lies in its

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2 Besides the *Renmin ribao* edition the same article is to be found in Bai Shouyi 1982a, pp. 17-33, and the longer original version in Bai Shouyi 1963, pp. 1-26. A different version of the text was published in Bai Shouyi 1979 and Bai Shouyi 1982b, pp. 1-16.

description of the Han dynasty. According to him, it is the Han-part that was the reason the *Shiji* was called a *bangshu* 謗書, a slanderous work, starting in Later Han times (*Hou Hanshu* 1965, 60B.2006). In what follows, Bai Shouyi often uses the word *xielu* 泄露 or *jielu* 揭露, to 'disclose': he says that the important thing is not how the *Shiji* draws images of people but how Sima Qian, through his speeches and actions, manages to reveal the political circumstances of that time. In writing the biography of Chancellor Li Si 李斯, the architect of the government of the First Emperor of Qin 秦始皇帝, Sima Qian 'discloses' the process of the rise and decline of the imperial state of Qin and the internal factors of that process. In writing about Han Xin 韓信 and chancellor Xiao He 蕭何, Sima Qian 'discloses' the nervous atmosphere characterized by foul and dangerous practices prevailing in the time after the establishment of the Han dynasty. Han Xin is a person who has many merits and is full of strategies but, because he is not good at hiding his intentions, eventually falls under the suspicion of Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (r. 202-194) and is killed. On the other hand, Xiao He is able to disperse the mistrust of the same emperor and ultimately manages to escape the many dangers he faces. Bai Shouyi then moves on to provide examples from the era of Emperor Wu of the Han 漢武帝 (r. 140-87 BC) and quotes from the biographies of his subjects to reveal how they cautiously tried to protect themselves, never expressing their own opinions or developing strategies to help the people. Instead, they always tried to get the attention of the emperor. For example, one of the sons of an official called «Lord Ten Thousand Piculs» (Wanshi jun 萬事君: five people in the family had a salary of 2000 piculs) used his whip to count the horses of the emperors' carriage when the latter had asked him how many horses were in front. The official, of course, knew by heart that there were six, but he was so afraid to commit a mistake that he preferred to count. Another son was afraid he would have to die because a dot was missing in the character 'horse' in a memorial that he had to present the Emperor (*Shiji* 1959, 103.2766 and 2767). According to Bai Shouyi, through these small details Sima Qian expressed his harsh criticism of the corrupt politics prevailing at Emperor Wu's court.

Why should a reader of *Renmin ribao* be interested in these small details in 1964? In his next paragraph on the «progressiveness of the *Shiji*» Bai Shouyi tells us that the *Shiji*, in putting in order important historical matters, laid special emphasis on the influence events had on the masses. Qin 秦 and Chu 楚 both fell because their leaders were brutal. Yet, Bai says that there are two chapters which show especially harsh criticism of Emperor Wu of the Han - namely, the treatise on the economy and the chapter with biographies of cruel officials. He tells us that under Emperor Wu, society was in turmoil because of the measures taken by tax authorities and he says that Sima Qian takes the fall of the Qin as a metaphor for his own times. The peasants did not have enough to eat and their

wives could not provide enough clothing for them to wear. So the peasants started an uprising and the Qin fell. There were unjust laws, and those whom the emperor wanted to be free were freed while those he wanted to condemn were condemned. In his chapter on the knight errants, Sima Qian criticized the emptiness of moral values, and in his chapter on the merchants he blamed the Confucians for perpetuating poverty at the same time as they upheld humanity and righteousness, because this was a good method for telling the people that they should not rebel even in their dire conditions. In this way, Sima Qian disclosed and criticized several aspects of feudalism, especially the aspect of autocraticism in feudalism, and he responded to the masses, especially to the political feelings of those who did not possess much.

Bai Shouyi then goes on to write about the famous two aims of Sima Qian, namely that he wanted to «investigate the border between Heaven and men and to penetrate the changes of old and new» 就天人之際，通古今之變 (Bai Shouyi 1982a, pp. 22-26). He first rightly shows that Sima Qian does not believe in the authority of Heaven, but then immediately comes back to his favorite subject, the empire's economic situation. He emphasizes that socioeconomics have their own laws of development and that the material needs of human beings demand that there should be a division of labor in production. According to Bai Shouyi – Sima Qian was of the opinion that «the needs of the material life of human beings necessarily drive forward the division of labor in the production of a society and the development of the economy of a society» and that «this is not something that could be forced by politics».<sup>3</sup> Bai Shouyi adds two more points, namely, that ownership and property decide who is an oppressor and who belongs to the oppressed, and that property decides what is moral, and the morals of the rich serve to conserve their vested rights. He then concludes that Sima Qian realized that material production was very important to social life and that wealth was vital not only to social and political relationships but also to social consciousness – a purely materialistic argumentation that, according to Bai Shouyi, is «a valuable heritage of the history of historical thought of the middle ages of our country» 這是我國中世史學思想史上珍貴的遺產。He adds that Sima Qian criticized the idea that «Heaven decides about wealth and nobility» 富貴在天 – not man – and that with this he again expressed his resistance to the monopolistic economic policies in Han Wudi's time (Bai Shouyi 1982a, pp. 23 ff.).

It is obvious that for Bai Shouyi the main point of the *Shiji* is its criticism: of the political atmosphere of intimidation, of the autocratism of Emperor Wu of the Han, of the suspicion and injustice of Emperor Gaozu

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3 Bai Shouyi 1982a, p. 23: 人們物質生活的需要必然推動社會生產的分工和社會經濟的發展，這不是政治力量所能創造出來的。

and Han Wudi, and finally of the centralist economic measures that were adopted under Emperor Wu. When considering that some of the readers of the *Renmin ribao* article may not have known by heart the *Shiji* – which applies perfectly to all of what Bai Shouyi says – one wonders whether it must not have looked to these readers like Sima Qian had neither criticized Emperors Gaozu and Wu of the Han nor the First Emperor of the Qin, but instead Mao Zedong’s Great Leap Forward; and furthermore, that this was the real reason the editors of *Renmin ribao* found this article of Bai Shouyi’s interesting enough to republish it in a shortened form. It is of some importance to note that all of the lengthy scholarly discussions that Bai Shouyi had published in his first version of the article, but which could obviously not serve the goal we have just outlined – namely, criticism of Mao Zedong and the Great Leap Forward – were cut when the *Renmin ribao* version was printed. For example, there are two paragraphs in the original article that talk about historical thinking at the time of the change from the Western to the Eastern Han and about the contributions made by Liu Xiang 劉向 (77-8 v.Chr.) and his son Liu Xin 劉歆 (d. 23 AD). They were omitted in the *Renmin ribao* version, clearly because readers would not have found very much there that they could have compared to their own situation and their living conditions.

Ban Gu 班固 (32-92) is treated later in the article by Bai Shouyi. He describes Ban Gu as ‘orthodox’ (*zhengzong de* 正宗的; Bai Shouyi 1982a, p. 26) and then attacks him for having erased the progressive contents of the *Shiji*. Despite the fact that Ban Gu made some very important new contributions, such as the description of the territory of Xinjiang in his chapter on the «Western Regions» («Xiyu» 西域, *Hanshu* 96; Bai Shouyi 1982a, p. 30), Bai argues that *Hanshu* emphasizes the region’s feudalistic elements and its eclecticism – obviously a negative term at that time. «It waters down the disclosure of social antagonisms» (冲淡了[...] 對於當時社會矛盾的揭露; Bai Shouyi 1982a, p. 30)<sup>4</sup> and is «poor in historical thinking» (他在歷史思想上的貧困; Bai Shouyi 1982a, p. 31). Finally, according to Bai Shouyi there are many contradictions in *Hanshu*. It is obvious that Bai greatly prefers the *Shiji* over the *Hanshu*. In the original article there followed a final paragraph on the *Hanji* 漢紀 of Xun Yue 荀悅 (148-209) and how it reorganized the *Hanshu*. This section is for obvious reasons left out of the *Renmin ribao* version of the article. Of course, it does not add much to the criticism that the later version voiced. Thus, it seems to me that the editors of *Renmin ribao* were interested in what Bai Shouyi wrote on Sima Qian because they could take it as an example of how «to use the past in order to serve the present». Ban Gu was probably described in such a

4 This topic obviously was dear to Bai Shouyi because he himself was a muslim and thus very interested in the links between China and the home province of the Uyghurs where most Chinese Muslims live.

negative manner by Bai Shouyi because he was very much in favour of the political and economic measures that Sima Qian had criticized: the politics of centralization and the strengthening of the military, and especially the establishment of monopolies in salt and iron, which reminded the reader in 1963-1964 of the collectivization in agriculture and industry.

Bai Shouyi's second article on Sima Qian and Ban Gu actually went back to a lecture that he had held in Peking. Chen Qitai 陳其泰 and Lai Changyang 賴長揚 took notes which they developed into a manuscript and published in 1979 in *Shixueshi ziliao* 史學資料, a journal put out by Bei shida. The piece was then used as a preface to *Sima Qian yanjiu xinlun* 司馬遷研究新論, a book published by Shi Ding 施丁 and Chen Keqing 陳可青 in 1982 (Bai Shouyi 1982b). A major difference between this article and the previous one with the same title is that the later one starts with five pages of historical theory and a description of the economic situation in the empire. Bai argues that the main contradiction under the Han was the conflict between landlords and peasants, but he also mentions the great progress that was made in scientific development. He explains that after the demise of the slave-holder society feudalism gave individual families (*geti jiating* 個體家庭) the chance to own their own land - again, one is surprised to find vocabulary that resembles the language used in the political discussion at the time when Deng Xiaoping had started his economic reforms and was promoting the activities of *geti hu* 個體戶 (Bai Shouyi 1982b, p. 2). Bai also talks about the different questions that the two historians wanted to address: Sima Qian wanted to give answers to why the Qin fell so quickly and why the Han rose so fast, or to what the new state should look like, while Ban Gu was more interested in keeping the status quo (Bai Shouyi 1982b, pp. 7-10). Sima Qian wanted to show historical changes while Ban Gu tried to give guiding principles; Sima Qian was objective (*keguan* 客觀), scientific (*jiejin kexue* 接近科學) and politically forward-looking (*zhengzhi shang xiang qian kan* 政治上向前看), while Ban Gu was idealistic (*weixin de* 唯心的), conservative (*baoshou* 保守) and backward-looking (*xiang hou kan de* 向後看的; Bai Shouyi 1982b, p. 10). Just as in his first article, the vocabulary Bai uses for Sima Qian is always positive, while with Ban Gu it is rather negative. But the tone has changed: While the former article was written to criticize collectivization, the latter talks about the new agenda of the Deng era: open-mindedness to the world and scientific progress are the two catchwords that are now ascribed to Sima Qian.

There is one section in the article in which Bai Shouyi talks about the treatises and admits that this is the part where Ban Gu is superior because the content of his treatises was more developed and mature (Bai Shouyi 1982, pp. 14-16). Yet, Bai then adds, again, that Sima Qian is better as far as *sixiang* 思想, ideas, are concerned. Only on his last two pages (Bai Shouyi 1982b, pp. 14-16) does Bai Shouyi briefly summarize what

had made up the major part of his first article on Sima Qian in the sixties. The examples that he gives are the same as in the previous article and the conclusions are, too. Here, Bai Shouyi repeats how dangerous autocracy is and how unhealthy the political atmosphere was when the sons of Mister Ten Thousand Piculs had to be so careful and could only succeed because they never ever expressed their opinions directly. In this last part of the article Bai Shouyi implicitly looked back on the atrocities of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward. Yet, it is obvious that while Bai Shouyi had not changed his opinion that Sima Qian's treatment of the history of the Han was to be preferred over Ban Gu's, he certainly was no longer as interested in these subjects as he had been under Mao Zedong in the 1960s. His new focus now were Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, which he implicitly commented on while writing on the two foremost historians of the Han dynasty.

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