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# Framing the Qin collapse: redaction and authorship of the *Shiji* 史記

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the relationship between the *Shiji*'s authors and their sources by examining how they constructed the historical narrative of the fall of the Qin Empire. While Sima Qian and his father Sima Tan have been traditionally credited as the authors of the *Shiji*, their authorial voice was recently challenged by scholars. In response to the revisionist view, this paper discerns that the *Shiji* maintains a consistent narrative of the Qin collapse, which is generated through rigorous source redactions whereby Sima Qian and/or Sima Tan were able to incorporate their ideological agenda and personal opinions in subtle ways that are almost invisible to the reader. With such anonymity, the historiographers succeeded in establishing the authority of their historical narratives. Rather than simply juxtaposing the narratives of their sources, the Simas indeed authored their “patterned past” of the Qin collapse. However, the past constructed in the *Shiji* comprises various independent narratives whose plausibility is contingent upon the respective epistemic quality of their evidence rather than a harmonious discourse.

**Keywords:** authorship; collapse of the Qin Empire; narrative production; redaction; *Shiji*

## 1 Introduction

The importance of the *Shiji* (*The Grand Scribe's Records*; or *The Documents of the Honorable Grand Scribe*, *Taishigong shu* 太史公書) in Chinese historiography is undisputed. Among extant early Chinese historical and quasi-historical texts, the *Shiji* contains comparatively detailed information about its author(s) and composition. The autobiographical final chapter of the *Shiji* and “The Letter to Ren An” (Bao Ren An shu 報任安書) reveal the aspirations and motivation of its putative author, Sima Qian 司馬遷, to a level of detail surpassing other

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contemporaneous texts.<sup>1</sup> While Sima Qian has been credited as the author of the text, his father Sima Tan 司馬談 was quite likely also involved in this project.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the unequivocal authorial intent declared by Sima Qian in his autobiographical writings, researchers often find it difficult to keep track of the Simas' ideological agendas and personal opinions in the *Shiji*'s historical narratives. With few exceptions, our historiographers prefer to position themselves as transmitters of the paragons' knowledge and remain invisible to their reader, who is in turn encouraged to believe that the presented narrative is "an undistorted, unbiased, anonymous, and documentary account."<sup>3</sup> In addition, the composite nature of this vast body of texts results in inconsistent or even contradictory accounts.<sup>4</sup>

These characteristics call into question the authorship of the *Shiji*. Doubts have been raised around the authenticity of certain chapters and the textual corruption in the transmitted *Shiji*.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, scholars pose challenges to the authorship of its autobiographical chapter and "The Letter to Ren An."<sup>6</sup> It is unclear if the Simas were the "authors" who processed their authorial intent and produced their own narrative texts or if they functioned mostly as editors or compilers of earlier

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1 For the motivations of the *Shiji*'s authors, see Durrant 1995: 1–27.

2 Li Changzhi 李長之 1963: 155–162; Schaab-Hanke 2010: 211–222. However, scholars tend to agree that even if the transmitted *Shiji* includes the work of Sima Tan, it is difficult to distinguish between the efforts of the father and son. Additionally, as Li has noted, Sima Qian likely refashioned the drafts of his father. In this respect, one can say that these parts still reflect the viewpoints and propositions of Sima Qian even if they were not originally from him (Li Changzhi 1963: 257). Thus, when referring to the viewpoints of the *Shiji* authors, I will simply call them "the Simas."

3 Kern 2003b: 289. Kern's remark is a reflection on Schaberg's analysis of the relationship between historical authority and anonymity in the *Zuo Tradition*. For details, see Schaberg 2001: 258–270.

4 For examples of inconsistencies in the *Shiji*, see Bodde 1940: 16–21; Hardy 1994: 24–38; Nienhauser Jr. 2019: xliii.

5 Scholars mostly focus on the ten chapters presumably lost at the early stage of the *Shiji*'s transmission that were only amended by later editors and compilers such as Chu Shaosun 褚少孫 as well as individual chapters such as *Shiji* 117 and 123. For the textual history and challenges to the authenticity of *Shiji* chapters, see Klein 2018: 41–76.

6 See Zhang 2018: ch. 5. Tamara Chin also understands names such as "Guanzi," "Sima Qian" and "Ban Gu" as Foucauldian "author-figures," treating them as "the authoritative names that ancient and modern readers have assigned to the text or textual tradition." Chin further suggests that the *Shiji*'s autobiographical chapter and its "the Honorable Grand Scribe says" (*Taishigong yue* 太史公曰) sections pertain not to the historical Sima Qian or Sima Tan, "but to the frustrated authorial persona 'Sima Qian' constructed by the *Shiji*"; see Chin 2014: 9. In a recent paper, Martin Kern suspects, despite by no means affirmatively, that the "the Honorable Grand Scribe says" sections may also be late additions; see Kern 2016: 48, n. 51. That said, quite a few scholars still maintain the view that the majority of the transmitted version may be traced back to the efforts of the two Simas; see, for example, van Ess 2014: 8.

sources, meaning that the *Shiji* is fundamentally a repository replete with narratives of its source material.<sup>7</sup>

This uncertainty leads to divergent interpretations of the hidden agenda behind the *Shiji*'s historical narratives. Some scholars reflect the critical intent of Sima Tan and Sima Qian, who, instead of reconstructing an objective and accurate account of the past, strove to establish “a literary universe that doubled and replaced the real world of events”<sup>8</sup> or create distorted and cloudy narratives by entangling their personal experiences with them.<sup>9</sup> Some construe that the rebellious Simas reacted to the political condition from which they suffered and that the *Shiji* emanated as a critique of the Han regime and its policies.<sup>10</sup> Others prefer to read the *Shiji* as a result of careful treatments of earlier sources and an honest documentation of historical reality.<sup>11</sup>

Some have made efforts to transcend the above dichotomy of, in Michael Nylan's terms, “social scientific” and “lyric/romantic” approaches.<sup>12</sup> They either attribute the composition of the *Shiji* to a religious dedication aiming at commemorating and redeeming the reputation of the Sima clan through the power of a monumental text that is both impartial and truthful in its depiction,<sup>13</sup> or they posit that the *Shiji*'s narrative may sometimes be misleading due to influences by biased primary sources.<sup>14</sup> Some authors further argue that the Simas intended to establish authority as historian by honestly deciphering the pattern and causality between historical destiny and individual endeavors,<sup>15</sup> while others assert that Sima Qian was filled with ambivalence about his approval of the innovation of the imperial edifice and his resentment toward its destruction of the tradition.<sup>16</sup> These discourses portray a diverse array of “Sima Qians,” some of whom are quite different from others.<sup>17</sup> To date, this ongoing debate shows no sign of reaching consensus.

One underlying reason for the present stalemate is our scant knowledge about the relationship between the Simas and their source material.<sup>18</sup> The *Shiji* authors

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7 Kern 2011: 101; Klein 2018: 27.

8 Lewis 1999: 316; Cai 2014: 45–75.

9 Durrant 1995: 147.

10 van Ess 2014: 5; Leung 2019: ch. 5.

11 Fujita 2008: 450.

12 Nylan 1998: 203–205.

13 Nylan 1998: 245.

14 Pines 2005/06: 10–34.

15 Li 1994: 405.

16 Puett 2001: 177–212.

17 As Esther Klein observes, many of these divergences have already existed since the very beginning of the *Shiji*'s reception; see Klein 2018: 149–392.

18 McKay 2018: 379–80 has also made a similar observation.



only occasionally inform us about their reasons for choosing source texts and rarely discuss how they edited these materials. Although previous studies have long recognized the possibility of a complex redactional process and concluded that the Simas utilized a wide spectrum of sources,<sup>19</sup> most of the extant studies have addressed the question of *what* rather than *how*.<sup>20</sup> Such a choice is mostly involuntary because despite the cornucopian flow of unearthed early Chinese texts in recent decades, they rarely include direct parallels to the *Shiji*.

While transmitted literature does contain such specimens and impressive outcomes have been generated through comparisons of transmitted texts, this method often yields inconclusive results. For example, the insightful work of Stephen Durrant demonstrates that Sima Qian “felt quite free to rework his source either by reference to other written or oral sources or his own creative imagination.” However, as Durrant himself proffers, “It may well be that additional research, or the application of a more rigorous methodology might allow a future study to present more certain and satisfying conclusions.”<sup>21</sup>

Admittedly, the current study by no means provides a definitive answer to this difficult question and it may be true that “we will never have a complete picture of the *Shiji*’s relationship to its sources.”<sup>22</sup> That said, since some of the recently surfaced Qin and Western Han manuscript sources comprise direct parallels to the *Shiji* or texts within the same genre as its source material, they are lenses through which we can scrutinize the more undistorted form of some of the *Shiji*’s source material. Although it would be facile to conclude that the Simas must have directly referenced these manuscript parallel, we may more concretely trace the redactions that the Simas may have made and, as such, further demystify their guiding principles and techniques to incorporate their sources into the *Shiji*. In the end, we may decide which set of existing arguments are more probable than others and thereby arrive at a more certain conclusion about how Sima Qian and his father constructed their historical narratives.

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<sup>19</sup> Scholars concerned about the source material of the *Shiji* have produced several comprehensive summaries on the titles of some of the cited sources; see Zhang Dake 張大可 et al. 2005: 94–107; Fujita 2016: 230, 549–557; Durrant 2015: 217–241; McKay 2018: 375–413.

<sup>20</sup> A few endeavors on the latter issue include Ruaan Jy-Sheng 阮芝生 1974: 17–35, esp. 29–32; Zhang Dake et al. 2005: 438–449.

<sup>21</sup> Durrant 2015: 239; for other case studies see Durrant 1995: 74–98; Hardy 1992: 18–22; Li 1994: 371–377. In addition, the painstaking study of van Ess 2014 illustrates the nuanced textual divergences between the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*, and, as such, pinpoints the *Shiji* authors’ possible political views and agendas. That said, what van Ess shows lies more in the textual redaction made by Ban Gu than by the Simas.

<sup>22</sup> Klein 2018: 28.

In this paper, I chose the collapse of the Qin Empire (221–207 BCE) as a case study of the production of narrative texts in the *Shiji*. I will detail several redactional devices that Sima Qian and/or his father wielded to appropriate their sources and to build a coherent narrative of the fall of Qin. First, I will dissect the textual abbreviation and condensation of an admonition of Ziying 子嬰 that appears in the “Arrayed Tradition of Meng Tian,” (henceforth *Shiji* 88) through a comparison with its manuscript parallel in the *Zhao Zheng shu* (趙正書; *Document of Zhao Zheng*). I will then examine the textual transposition observed in Li Si’s 李斯 speech on the proscription of private learning in the “Basic Annals of the First Emperor of Qin” (henceforth *Shiji* 6) by comparing its text to unearthed Qin ordinances.

I contend that two intertwined propositions recur in the narrative texts and remarks of both *Shiji* 6 and 88. They are (1) the disastrous consequences of deviating from the traditional practices of ancient paragons and violating norms and (2) the failure of the Qin leadership (the emperors and ministers) to accept remonstrance and give advice. Admittedly, these two propositions may not sound particularly ground-breaking at first glance.<sup>23</sup> However, here I focus more on the *how* rather than *what*. I will illustrate how the ideological agenda of the Simas is encoded in their historical narratives by rigorously reworking source material. These features suggest that rather than simply copying earlier narrative texts,<sup>24</sup> the Simas meticulously framed the historical narrative of the Qin collapse in the *Shiji*. In this regard, they were not only the editors and compilers of existing sources, but more importantly, authors with their own opinions and beliefs.

## 2 *Shiji* 88 and textual abbreviation and condensation

The *Shiji*’s narration of the Qin collapse is scattered mainly in three different chapters, namely, *Shiji* 6, 87 (the “Arrayed Tradition of Li Si”), and 88. In *Shiji* 88, the Simas directly addressed this issue in the “the Honorable Grand Scribe says” section:

夫秦之初滅諸侯，天下之心未定，夷傷者未瘳，而恬為名將，不以此時彊諫，……而阿意興功，此其兄弟遇誅，不亦宜乎？何乃罪地脈哉？

<sup>23</sup> The first proposition has been thoroughly examined in Puett 2001: 188–212, whereas Itō Tokuo 伊藤徳男 has addressed the second in Itō 1964: 43–56.

<sup>24</sup> This is one of the popular views with regard to the Simas and their sources, advocating that they were mostly faithful to their sources and preferred to cite them verbatim; see Bodde 1940: 39; Hardy 1999: 44; Fujita 2008: 450; Klein 2018: 27.

When Qin first destroyed the regional lords, the hearts of [the populace in] all-under-heaven were not yet settled and the injured not yet recovered, yet [Meng] Tian, after establishing himself as a famous general, did not vigorously remonstrate at this moment ... but instead bent to the [emperor's] whims and mobilized [labor for earth] works;<sup>25</sup> was it not fitting that these older and younger brothers should be condemned? Why blame the earth's veins?<sup>26</sup>

Here, the Honorable Grand Scribe condemns Meng Tian for failing to admonish his master for constructing the expensive Straight Road, which exhausted the labor power of the population. In a similar vein, the Grand Scribe's remark in *Shiji* 87 accuses Li Si of "failing to devote himself to enlightened governance with which to remedy his ruler's shortcomings" 不務明政以補主上之缺 and being "slavish in his conformity and unscrupulous in his agreement" 阿順苟合. The Simas ended their critique of Li with a rhetorical question: "When the regional lords revolted, [Li] Si then wished to remonstrate. Wasn't this useless indeed?" 諸侯已畔, 斯乃欲諫爭, 不亦末乎?<sup>27</sup> It is clear that the Grand Scribe believed the most grievous fault of Meng Tian and Li Si was their inability to admonish their masters' wrongdoings.<sup>28</sup> This reinforces the prevalent contemporaneous view that the Qin collapse was partially caused by the arrogance of the Qin emperors who refused to heed the advice of their subordinates (for an example, see the *Zhao Zheng shu* below). For the Simas, the mistakes of the Qin rulership were not confined to the Qin emperors. Instead, they posited that Qin ministers such as Li Si and Meng Tian should also take the blame.

However, the "subtle words" (*wei yan* 微言) that the Simas buried in *Shiji* 88 go beyond this message. What follows is an introduction to the content and possible dating of the *Zhao Zheng shu* text. Then, I will analyze the parallel passage between the transmitted *Shiji* 88 and the *Zhao Zheng shu*. In doing so, I discern some of the textual abbreviations potentially exercised by the *Shiji*'s authors to incorporate their source material into their own narrative.

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25 Both "興" (*xing*; "to levy," "to mobilize") and "功" (*gong*; "merit," "work") were Han legal and administrative terminologies. For instance, a legal statute from the "Statutes on Levies" in the *Statutes and Ordinances of the Second Year* (*Ernian lüling* 二年律令) of the Zhangjiashan tomb 247 manuscripts prescribes that "Do not mobilize [men] for earth work on wù days [of the fifth month] or jǐ days [of the sixth month]" 毋以戊己日興土功. The use of *xing* and *gong* in this statute is congruent with that in the Honorable Grand Scribe's comment; for the transcription and translation of this statute, I follow Barbieri-Low/Yates 2015: 698–699, section no. 3.13.9, strip no. 250.

26 *Shiji* 88.3118–3119; the translation is slightly modified from Nienhauser Jr. 2021: 681.

27 *Shiji* 87.3108–3109; the translation of the remark is slightly modified from Nienhauser Jr. 2021: 663.

28 Such a criticism is also directed to another famous Qin general Wang Jian 王翦; see Itō 1964: 44–45.



The *Zhao Zheng shu* manuscript is now part of Peking University's Qin and Western Han manuscript collection.<sup>29</sup> Since these manuscripts were looted from tombs, their archeological context is mostly lost, and there are suspicions that the collection might comprise forgeries.<sup>30</sup> However, more careful examinations of the materiality of the published Peking manuscripts support their authenticity.<sup>31</sup>

Mostly intact, the *Zhao Zheng shu* is written on a multistrip manuscript comprising fifty reconstructed bamboo strips (including four fragments) measuring 30.2–30.4 cm (approximately 1.3 *chi* in the Qin-Han measurement) with a width of 0.8–1 cm. The title “Zhao Zheng shu” is written on the verso of the second strip. Traces of binding strings and notches suggest that the manuscript should have had three binding strings. Complete strips carry 28–32 characters in the standard Han clerical script (*li shu* 隸書).<sup>32</sup> The handwriting of the manuscript is uniform and tidy, possibly indicating that it was brushed by the same scribe. In addition, a round, black ink dot appears on top of the first binding string of the first strip, signaling the beginning of the text. With the exception of several replication marks, no further punctuation or paragraphing can be seen until the penultimate strip, where a “ $\angle$ ” mark is inserted to separate the main text from the scribe(s)' remark.

Despite the uniform handwriting of the manuscript, a few structural variations of graphs can be observed. The graph of the character “壞” in strip 17 was brushed as “壞” (𢦏), with a “手” instead of the more common “土” component, which appears in the two “壞” graphs in strips 40 (“𢦏”) and 44 (“𢦏”). Aside from their components, the lower “𠂔” part between these two sets of “壞” graphs also differs. The “𠂔” in strip 17 is written as “𠂔,” whose structure is simpler than those in strips 40 and 44, both of which are in the “𠂔” form.<sup>33</sup> Given the overall

<sup>29</sup> For the photo and transcription of the manuscript, unless otherwise stated, I use the version of Peking daxue Chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 2015, 149–194. The most detailed textual studies of the *Zhao Zheng shu* to date are the annotated German translation of Emmerich 2017: 70–87, and the Japanese translation of Waseda Daigaku kanpaku kenkyūkai 2018: 71–106. I am also grateful to Christopher Foster, who generously shared his unpublished, high-quality English translation with me. The translation of the *Zhao Zheng shu* in this article benefits immensely from these previous efforts.

<sup>30</sup> To date, the only research papers that openly question the authenticity of the Peking University manuscripts are Xing Wen 2016a and 2016b.

<sup>31</sup> Foster 2017: 185–232; Staack 2017.

<sup>32</sup> On the basis of its calligraphic style, Zhao Huacheng 趙化成 ponders if the manuscript was written between late second century and early first century BCE; see Zhao Huacheng 2015: 300.

<sup>33</sup> Graphic variation of character components also occurs elsewhere in this manuscript. In strip 15 the scribe wrote the “辵” component of two consecutive characters “道遠” as “辵” and “辵,” and in strip 30 he brushed the two “過” graphs, respectively as “過” and “過.” These indicate that writing the same component in slightly distinct forms is a usual stylistic choice of this scribe to avoid the repetition of graphic elements, which differs from the structural variants of the “壞”

consistency of the handwriting and orthography of this manuscript, these orthographic irregularities seem to indicate that the scribe might have brushed the text at different times on the same set of writing support,<sup>34</sup> or he inadvertently incorporated the calligraphic feature of his source material when copying.<sup>35</sup>

As a “document” (*shu* 書), the *Zhao Zheng shu* has the characteristics of the *shu* genre of texts. Yegor Grebnev conducts a thorough categorization of the *shu* texts in the transmitted *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書 and *Shang shu* 尚書. He summarizes five text types: (1) dramatic speeches, (2) nondramatic speeches, (3) brief speech related to dream revelations, (4) texts with writing-informed contextualization, and (5) plot-based stories with dialogues. While the fifth type of *shu* text is marginal in the two text corpora analyzed by Grebnev,<sup>36</sup> the *Zhao Zheng shu*, and most Arrayed Traditions (*liezhuan* 列傳)—as well as some of the Basic Annals (*benji* 本紀) and Hereditary Houses (*shijia* 世家)—of the *Shiji*, belong to such plot-based stories.

Notably, the fifth text type juxtaposes documentary and anecdotal modes of narration.<sup>37</sup> While the major building blocks of the *Zhao Zheng shu*’s text are long, direct speeches purported to be the authentic words of the Qin rulers,<sup>38</sup> they are mediated through several formulaic, concise anecdotal frames that both contextualize these speeches and push the narrative toward the conclusion: The Qin dynasty collapsed because the Second Emperor (Huhai 胡亥) failed to heed the apt advice of his ministers. To foreground this thesis, the catchphrase “King Huhai of Qin did not listen” 秦王胡亥弗聽 was placed at the end of each of the four speeches

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graphs listed above. For the distinction between stylistic and structural variations of graphs and an analysis of analogous phenomena observed in the Warring States manuscripts, see Richter 2013: 37–45.

**34** In other words, the scribe might have copied the first half of the text on a premade, bound multistrip document, where space (blank slips) was left for the future addition of textual units. Later, he continued to ink the remaining parts of the text on these blank slips.

**35** Matthias Richter details how a scribe may adopt the calligraphic features or even the mistakes of another scribe during the reproduction of manuscripts in Richter 2009: 897–905.

**36** Grebnev 2017: 266–272.

**37** Here, I borrow the terms of Rens Krijgsman, who posits that the documentary mode of narration strives to let readers believe that a text represents the actual and authoritative past; its language is thus “predicative,” aiming at remembering and preserving cultural memory, and conveying historical immediacy and actuality. The language of the anecdotal mode, on the other hand, is “attributive” in the sense that an anecdote reflects on the past and attributes “new, contemporaneous, elements to existing narratives.” Krijgsman suggests that the text of *Baoxun* 保訓 from the Tsinghua manuscripts, rather unusually, juxtaposes both the abovementioned modes and creates a “fundamental tension” in its narrative; see Krijgsman 2017: 301–305.

**38** For such a feature of the *shu* genre, see Allan 2012: 547–557.

articulated by Li Si and Ziying. In view of the oral tradition of the time, this line may also serve as a potential mnemonic availed by its users to recite the text more efficiently.<sup>39</sup>

Ever since information on the *Zhao Zheng shu* was first released, its content has drawn much scholarly attention not only because of its intertextuality but also because of its irreconcilable discrepancies with the *Shiji*. In the *Zhao Zheng shu*, Huhai 胡亥, the Second Emperor of Qin, is portrayed as the legitimate heir of the First Emperor instead of the usurper who conspired with Zhao Gao 趙高 and Li Si to steal the throne from his elder brother Fusu 扶蘇. Moreover, while Zhao Gao is briefly referred to as an indecent minister who later assassinated his master, this text states that Zhao was killed by Zhang Han 章邯 rather than Ziying in the *Shiji* account.<sup>40</sup>

The text of the *Zhao Zheng shu* probably emerged prior to the composition of the *Shiji*. As multiple scholars have pointed out, while the account in the *Zhao Zheng shu* differs significantly from that in the *Shiji*, it conforms to many pre-*Shiji* narratives. For instance, the narrator of the *Zhao Zheng shu* does not accept the legitimacy of the Qin dynasty. The Qin emperors are called the “King of Qin” (Qin Wang 秦王), and in a speech ascribed to the First Emperor, he identifies himself as a “Hegemon” (*ba wang* 霸王). These appellations are ubiquitous in the extant early Western Han narratives but differ from those adopted in the *Shiji*, where the Qin emperors are addressed as the “August Thearch” (Huangdi 皇帝).<sup>41</sup>

The *Zhao Zheng shu*’s depiction of the Second Emperor and Zhao Gao are also consonant with extant pre-*Shiji* accounts. Despite his ferocious criticisms of Qin’s brutal policies, in his influential “On the Fault of Qin” (Guo Qin lun 過秦論), Jia Yi 賈誼 never questions the legitimacy of the Second Emperor of Qin’s enthronement; his comment on Zhang Han echoes that points in the second admonition of

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<sup>39</sup> Note that this anecdotal frame is not always inserted seamlessly. In the last three appearances of the “King Huhai of Qin did not listen” frame, it is always followed by the sentence “[Huhai] thereupon killed [Li] Si” (胡亥)遂殺(李)斯. However, the second and third appearances of this line are anachronistic as, according to the narrative of the text, Li Si should have been executed after submitting his first memorial. Whether such a discrepancy indicates potential textual accretions is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>40</sup> For the divergences between the *Shiji* and *Zhao Zheng shu*, see Zhao Huacheng 2015: 300–302; Nylan 2018: 87 also makes brief mention of their contrasting narratives.

<sup>41</sup> Based on these textual features, Zhao Huacheng 2015: 299–300 hypothesizes that the producer(s) of the *Zhao Zheng shu* text might have been the descendants of the six states eliminated by Qin between 230 and 221 BCE. Nevertheless, these appellations can also be found in texts that were not produced by these descendants. For example, Jia Yi in his “On the Fault of Qin” calls the First Emperor “King of Qin,” and so does the “Renjian xun” 人間訓 chapter of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子; see *Shiji* 6.353–354, 356; *Huainanzi* 18.1255. To date, there is no direct evidence to attest the validity of Zhao’s tempting theory.



Ziying.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the blame attributed to Zhao Gao for the demise of the Qin regime is not as heavy in most of the early Western Han discourses as it is in the *Shiji*. In fact, quite a few early Western Han accounts depict only Zhao Gao, along with Li Si, as one of the indecent ministers who taught the Second Emperor the immoral “Legalist” ideology and helped him implement the inhumane policies stemming from this ideology.<sup>43</sup>

In these texts, descriptions of Zhao’s deceptions are usually not as dramatic as those in the *Shiji*. For example, the *Xinyu* (新語; *New Discourses*) of Lu Jia 陸賈 comprises the famous story of “pointing at the deer and naming it a horse.” However, the takeaway from this story is that the ruler must stand his ground against the deceit of his evil subordinates.<sup>44</sup> These ideological features are a marked contrast to the records in the *Shiji*. Rather, they resemble the account of the *Zhao Zheng shu*. This once again supports the assumption that it is one of the pre-*Shiji* accounts on the fall of the Qin.

At its heart, the *Zhao Zheng shu* suggests that the collapse of the Qin Empire is due to the failure of Huhai to accept admonitions. Similar to the Honorable Grand Scribe in the *Shiji*, the anonymous scribe(s) concluded the essay with the following remark: “Huhai was what one calls someone who does not listen to admonitions, and [that is why] in the fourth year after his enthronement, he himself died and his state perished” 胡亥所謂不聽聞(諫)者也, 立四年而身死國亡 (strips 49–50).<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting that such an attribution is by no means rare in discourses among early Han thinkers. Jia Shan 賈山, a contemporary of Jia Yi, once submitted a memorial to Emperor Wen of Han, in which he tried to warn the emperor about the current political and diplomatic issues by enumerating the evil deeds of the Qin dynasty. One of Jia Shan’s major propositions echoes the central idea of the *Zhao Zheng shu*.<sup>46</sup> Their proximity in some measure supports the classification of the *Zhao Zheng shu* as a pre-*Shiji* text.

While the *Zhao Zheng shu* is an interesting text in its own right, here I concentrate on its textual parallels to the transmitted *Shiji*. The manuscript contains two major textual parallels to the transmitted *Shiji*, namely, a memorial of Li Si in *Shiji* 87 and an admonition made by Ziying in *Shiji* 88. Despite the sizeable

<sup>42</sup> Chen Kanli 陳侃理 2016: 34–35.

<sup>43</sup> For related discourses, see *Xinyu* 3.51; *Xinshu* 5.185; *Huainanzi* 20.1408.

<sup>44</sup> *Xinyu* 5.75–76.

<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, this remark only sums up the content of the first half of the *Zhao Zheng shu* and ignores Li Si’s second memorial and its subsequent texts. Such a unidimensional remark seems to hint that these sections were added later. Given the complexity of textual production in the early Chinese texts, this hypothesis is subject to further study.

<sup>46</sup> *Hanshu* 51.2327–2336. For an introduction to Jia Shan’s memorial to Emperor Wen, see Emmerich 2006: 66–80, especially p. 70.



body of scholarship on the *Zhao Zheng shu*, the comparison between the *Shiji* text and its manuscript version remains relatively unexplored. To date, Chen Kanli 陳侃理 provides the most in-depth study around the intertextuality between these two texts. Chen shows that the authors of the *Shiji* at least referenced a text akin to that of the *Zhao Zheng shu* manuscript, if not the text itself.<sup>47</sup> That said, Chen's paper appears to overlook some of the striking textual redactions made by the *Shiji*'s authors, who embedded their opinions about the fall of the Qin regime in these editorial works.

To better illustrate the possible redaction by the Simas, I will provide the full citation of the first admonition of Ziying (strips 18–26) in the *Zhao Zheng shu*, which parallels a speech attributed to Ziying, where the interlocutor tries to dissuade his lord from executing the Meng brothers,<sup>48</sup> in *Shiji* 88:

子嬰進聞(諫)曰:「不可。臣聞之:芬苳未根而生周(凋)害(香)同,天地相去遠而陰陽氣合,五國十二諸侯,民之耆(嗜)欲不同而意不異。夫趙王鉅殺其良將李微(微)而用顓(顏)聚,燕王喜而<sup>49</sup>軻之謀而倍(背)秦之約,齊王建遂<sup>50</sup>殺其古(故)世之忠臣而<sup>51</sup>后勝之議。此三君者,皆冬(終)以失其國而央(殃)其身。是皆大臣之謀,而社稷(稷)之神零福也。今王<sup>52</sup>欲一日而棄去之,臣竊(竊)以為不可。臣聞之:『輕慮不可以治固(國),蜀(獨)勇不可以存將。<sup>53</sup>同力可以舉重,比心壹智可以勝眾;而弱勝強者,上下調而多力壹也。』今國危適(敵)必(比),鬪(鬪)士在外,而內自夷宗族,誅羣忠臣,而立無節(節)行之人,是內使羣臣不相信,而外使鬪(鬪)士之意離也。臣竊(竊)以為不可。」

47 As Chen Kanli has pointed out, segments of an earlier speech of Li Si (which was not included in the *Shiji*) in the *Zhao Zheng shu* are interpolated into the *Shiji* version of the first Li Si memorial to Huhai. This indicates that the *Shiji* authors probably should have seen a text similar to the *Zhao Zheng shu*; see Chen Kanli 2016: 29–30.

48 *Shiji* 88.3116.

49 With regard to the word “而” in this and the next sentences, Wang Ning 王寧 reads them as verbs connoting the action of “to enable,” “to adopt.” Such a usage is obscure but exists in preimperial texts; see Wang Ning 2015. In the transmitted *Shiji* version, this sentence appears as “treacherously used Jing Ke’s plot” 陰用荊軻之謀, which is more grammatically correct.

50 Wang Ning argues that the word “遂” (*sui*; “thereupon”) is a scribal mistake of “逐” (*zhu*; “to exile,” “to banish”). Emmerich renders “遂” as “vertrieb” (banished); see Wang Ning 2015; Emmerich 2017: 80. However, this change seems unnecessary since “遂殺” is perfectly grammatical. Also note that the “遂” here is omitted in the transmitted *Shiji* version.

51 The *Shiji* version inserts a verb “用” (“to use”) after the “而” character.

52 The *Shiji* version replaces the term “王” with “主” (*zhu*; master), which accords better with the wording of other passages, as the *Shiji* authors usually conceded the status of Huhai as an emperor instead of merely a regional lord.

53 Interestingly, the *Shiji* modifies this sentence to “those who rely on the wisdom of a single body cannot preserve their lords” 獨智者不可以存君. This is opposed to the martial character of the manuscript version.

Ziying presented an admonition saying: “This cannot be done. Your servant has heard that *fen* and *chai* have not yet taken root, but the seasons of their growing, withering, and scenting are identical; heaven and earth are distant from each other, but the energies of *yin* and *yang* still assemble; and the preferences and desires of the people in the [region of] five states and twelve regional lords are not identical, but their intentions are with no difference. King Ju of Zhao<sup>54</sup> killed his able commander Li Wei (also known as Li Mu) and appointed Yen Ju, King Xi of Yen adopted [Jing] Ke’s plot and broke the agreement with Qin, and King Jian of Qi thereupon killed his faithful vassals of earlier generations [and] adopted Hou Sheng’s proposal. All three lords eventually lost their states and brought disaster upon themselves. These were caused by the plots of grand ministers and the blessings awarded by the spirits of Soil and Grain. Now your highness intends to discard them in one day, and this is what your servant secretly feels inappropriate. Your servant has heard that ‘Carelessness is not a means by which one can govern, and the valiantness of a single [person] is not a means by which one can save a general’s life. By assembling others’ powers, one can lift the heavy; by unifying others’ hearts and integrating their wisdom, one can win over the many; and the weak who win over the strong use [their ability to] let the top and bottom be synchronized and to unify heterogeneous powers.’ Now the state is in danger, and our enemies are united. While our warriors are fighting abroad, internally, we are exterminating our ancestral lineage, condemning many of our loyal ministers, and establishing a man who is devoid of principle and integrity; this internally causes our ministers to lose confidence in the realm, and the will of warriors fighting abroad slackens. Your servant secretly feels that this cannot be done.”

As Derk Bodde noted in 1940, the Ziying speech in *Shiji* 88 should be based on an earlier source instead of the Simas’ own invention.<sup>55</sup> The speech cited above confirms his insight. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the context of this speech in the *Zhao Zheng shu* differs from the transmitted *Shiji* version. In the manuscript version, Ziying remonstrated because Huhai planned to kill<sup>56</sup> both Fusu and Meng Tian and appointed the bondservant (*li chen* 隸臣) Zhao Gao as the Prefect of the Palace (*langzhong ling* 郎中令). The *Shiji*, however, sets the backdrop purely against the Meng clan. It is not clear if the Simas were responsible for framing this new historical background, if they incorporated the speech into an existing story, or if they utilized a narrative text where such a change was already in place.

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54 It is worth noting that the text of the transmitted *Shiji* comprises the word “*gù*” (故; “tradition,” “past”) before “趙王遷.” *The Grand Scribe’s Records* renders this line as “the former King of Chao, Ch’ien killed his able vassal Li Mu”; Nienhauser Jr. 2021: 677. However, here the “*gù*” may be used as the adverb “formerly” expressing that these events occurred in the past. Such a treatment nonetheless differentiates this speech from the setting and focus of its *Zhao Zheng shu* parallel. I will address this point in more detail later.

55 Bodde 1940: 64.

56 The original text reads “to immediately kill” (*ji sha* 即殺). However, considering the context of Ziying’s speech and the content of later passages, this should be either a scribal error of “to want to kill” (*yu sha* 欲殺) or “to immediately want to kill” (*ji yu sha* 即欲殺). This again demonstrates the sloppy editing of the *Zhao Zheng shu*.

Aside from the miscellaneous textual variants discussed in the footnotes, the text of the transmitted *Shiji* 88 consists of several more substantial discrepancies when compared with its textual parallel in the *Zhao Zheng shu*.

1. The flowery introduction prior to “King Ju of Zhao” is ripped out.
2. The sentence “These are [owing to] the plots of grand ministers and the blessing awarded by the spirits of Soil and Grain” is replaced by “now the Meng clan serves as the Qin’s grand ministers and advisers” 今蒙氏秦之大臣謀士也.
3. The part from “by assembling [others’] powers one can lift the heavy” to “internally, we are exterminating our ancestral lineage” is abridged.
4. The clause “because of breakers of traditional practices” 各以變古者 is inserted into the sentence “all three lords eventually lost their states and brought disaster to themselves.” The *Shiji* version reads “all three lords, because of breakers of traditional practices, lost their states and brought disaster on themselves” 此三君者，皆各以變古者失其國而殃及其身.<sup>57</sup>

While all the aforementioned changes cannot be unquestionably attributed to the Simas, that the historiographers chose to include such a narrative in their work is an endorsement of the ideological bent. In fact, some of the listed textual amendments suggest the fingerprints of the Simas. For example, the third adjustment may have aimed at maintaining coherence. In the dating system of the *Shiji*, Meng Tian’s execution predated the anti-Qin movement,<sup>58</sup> so it would be strange to claim that the future of Qin was at stake at that point.

Notably, the fourth change seems to illustrate the Simas’ opinions about the Qin collapse. I suggest that the phrase is in fact a condensation of the second memorial of Li Si, which is written on strips 39–44:

斯則死矣，見王之今從斯矣。雖然，遂出善言。臣聞之曰：「變古亂常，不死必亡。」今自夷宗族，壞其社稷(稷)，燔其律令及古(故)世之臧(藏)，所謂變古(故)而亂常者也。王見病者乎？酒肉之惡，安能食乎？破國亡家。善言之惡，安能用乎？察(登)高智(知)其危矣而不智(知)所以自安者；前據白刃自智且死而不智所以自生者。夫逆天道而倍(背)其鬼神之神零福，威(滅)

<sup>57</sup> *The Grand Scribe’s Records* translates “變古者” as “changing precedents.” The term “變古者” (*biangǔzhe*) also appears in the “Nan Mian” 南面 chapter of the *Hanfeizi*: “All the people who criticize those who alter traditional practices fear to change the subjects’ habitus. Those who do not alter traditional practices only follow the trajectory of destruction; those who satisfy the subjects’ hearts only coddle evil behavior” 凡人難變古者，憚易民之安也。夫不變古者，襲亂之跡；適民心者，恣姦之行也。The “*biangǔzhe*” clearly refers to reformers of traditional practices. Although the idea expressed herein differs diachronically from that in *Shiji* 88, the term should share a similar meaning, denoting the breaker of a tradition or a precedent rather than the action of breaking it; see *Shiji* 88.3116; Nienhauser Jr. 2021: 677; *Hanfeizi* 5.286, section no. 18.4.

<sup>58</sup> It is placed instantly after the enthronement of Huhai in 209 BCE, months before the outbreak of the Chen Sheng rebellion. See *Shiji* 6.336.

其先人及自夷宗族，壞其社稷(稷)，燔其律令及中人之功力而求更始者，王勉之矣。斯見其央(殃)今至矣！

I (Li Si) am about to die and see that your highness (King Huhai) is following me. That said, I thereupon give out some kind words to you. Your servant has heard that “When one alters traditional practices and disturbs normality, if he or she does not die, he or she will be lost.”<sup>59</sup> Now you have destroyed your own ancestral lineage, perished your altars to the Soil and Grain, and burned your statutes and ordinances and the storage of earlier generations, and this is what one calls a person who alters traditional practices and disturbs normality. Has the king seen those sick people? Detesting wine and food,<sup>60</sup> how can they consume them? The state is shattered and the house has perished. Detesting kind words, how can [rulers] accept them? For examination, someone climbs atop<sup>61</sup> and knows that he or she is in danger but does not know how to protect himself or herself; When someone’s front encounters a sharp blade,

**59** The distinction between “死” and “亡” is puzzling. Nienhauser Jr. 2008: 350, n. 153 suggests reading “亡” as the organizational collapse of a state or polity, whereas “死” should be understood as the demise at a personal level. Here, I follow the translation of Christopher Foster, who renders “亡” as “to be lost.” Note that the clause “不死必亡” is a ubiquitous predication in the early Chinese hemerological manuals such as daybooks (*rishu* 日書). For instance, one of the daybook manuscripts from the Fangmatan 放馬灘 tomb no. 1 states: “Whenever black-headed ones travel for afar levy, do not go on *jiazi*, *wuchen*, and *bingshen* days; [otherwise] if they do not die, they will be lost” 凡黔首行遠役毋以甲子、戊辰、丙申，不死必亡. Another hemerological prescription predicts that: “[When one] travels on *bingyin*, *dingmao*, *renxu*, and *guihai* days, he or she gets lost; [when one] returns [on these days], he or she dies” 丙寅、丁卯、壬戌、癸亥以行，亡；歸，死. In this context, “亡” refers to the permanent, irreversible loss of both one’s physical body and one’s way during travel; see *Qin jiandu heji*, vol. 4, 72, strips nos. 317/1, 124/1. Since the cited proverb in the *Shiji*, the *Zhao Zheng shu* and other contemporaneous philosophical and historical texts probably emanated from this popular usage, the “亡” herein should denote a similar meaning.

**60** I understand the “酒肉” in the “酒肉之惡” as the inverted object of the transitive verb “惡” (*wu*; “to dislike,” “to loathe,” “to slander”). In other words, “酒肉之惡” simply means “惡酒肉.” A similar sentence structure can be found in *Hanshu* 39, where Xiao He exhorts Liu Bang to accept his enfeoffment: “Although [your highness] loathes reigning the Hanzhong region, is it still better than death?” 雖王漢中之惡，不猶愈於死乎？ Glossing the “惡” in this sentence as an adjective (“wicked,” “ugly”) or a noun (“mistake,” “evil”) does not fit into its context, which states that Liu Bang was furious that Xiang Ji enfeoffed him with the land of Hanzhong rather than the promised Guanzhong. In addition, board 8–157 of the *Liye* manuscripts comprises the line “何律令應,” where “何律令” should be the inverted object of the verb “應” (*ying*; “to correspond”); “何律令應” can be rendered as “to which statutes and ordinances does this correspond?” See *Hanshu* 39.2006; *Liye Qin jiandu jiaoshi* 2012, 94.

**61** The editors of the *Zhao Zheng shu* propose reading the character “察” as “桀,” which is the name of the tyrannic last ruler of the mystical Xia 夏 dynasty, while Wang Ning suggests reading it literally as “to examine,” “to look.” Reinhard Emmerich rejects Wang’s proposal, believing that his reading makes the text even less comprehensible than the editors’ glossary. Here, I adopt Wang’s reading, since (1) the appearance of “桀” does not fit in with the content of the next sentence and the overall context, and (2) the pronunciation of the characters “察” and “桀” significantly differs in old Chinese and thus can hardly serve as each other’s loan; see Wang Ning 2015; Emmerich 2017: 85–86, n. 119; Wu Kejing 鄔可晶 2020: 355.

he or she knows that he or she is going to die but does not know how to rescue himself or herself. Those who contravene heaven's way and turn their back on their ancestral ghosts and spirits' (spirit)<sup>62</sup> awarded blessing, who exterminate their ancestors and ruin their own ancestral lineage, who destroy their altars to the Soil and Grain, and who burn statutes and ordinances and slander the merits and strengths of subjects<sup>63</sup> but pursue a new start — these are what your highness should be wary of. I see that the catastrophe is now coming!

This didactic speech warns of the harms of deviating from traditional practices. Together with the succeeding Ziying admonition, they are the only two sections in the *Zhao Zheng shu* that explicitly correlate the demise of the Qin polity with this line of thought.<sup>64</sup>

The prose within this speech constantly refers to the contents of earlier building blocks. In strip 43, the line “turn their back on their ancestral ghosts and spirits' (spirit) awarded blessing” 倍(背)其鬼神之神零福 is difficult to understand. The second “神” (*shen*; spirit) prior to the character “零” (*ling*; to pour) renders the sentence tautological. Note that this “神” character may not be an interpolation. Instead, it may come from the source text, specifically, the line “the blessing awarded from the spirits of Soil and Grain” 社稷之神零福稷 in strip 22. The scribe probably wanted to reduce textual repetition by replacing the term “社稷” (Soil and Grain) with another common term, “鬼神” (ghosts and spirits). However, the scribe might have been unaware that the original text already contains the character “神,” or he forgot to remove the extra character.

While the transmitted *Shiji* does not include Li Si's second memorial, the possibility that the Simas had accessed this text cannot be excluded. An (almost) verbatim quotation can be found in the “the Honorable Grand Scribe says” section of the joint memoir of Yuan Ang 袁盎 and Chao Cuo 趙錯, which reads as follows:

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62 Wang Ning postulates that two characters “社稷” are missed after the second “神.” Thus, he suggests reading the line as “夫逆天道而倍(背)其鬼神, [社稷]之神零福.” Although Reinhard Emmerich acknowledges Wang's proposal in a footnote, he does not incorporate such a reading into his translation and leaves the second “神” untranslated. Here I side with Emmerich, except that I also translate the redundant second “神” to show the sloppiness of the original text. See Wang Ning 2015; Emmerich 2017: 86, n. 120.

63 Yao Lei reads the “中” (*zhong*; “middle”) character as “忠” (*zhong*; “loyal”), while the Waseda Daigaku kanpaku kenkyūkai renders it as “to hurt,” “to slander,” which is adopted here; see Yao Lei 2016: 8; Waseda Daigaku kanpaku kenkyūkai 2018: 102, n. 7.

64 Chen Kanli has also realized the insertion of “each relied on those who altered the tradition,” but he argues that such a phrase derives from another source whose nature is similar to that of the *Zhao Zheng shu*; see Chen Kanli 2016: 31.



語曰：「變古亂常，不死則亡。」豈錯等謂邪？

A saying says: “When one alters traditional practices and disturbs normality, if he or she does not die, he or she will be lost.” Can this be said about [Chao] Cuo and the like?<sup>65</sup>

While this notion recurs in the *Gongyang* 公羊 *Tradition* and various contemporaneous masters’ (*zi* 子) texts, such as Jia Yi’s *Xinshu* (新書; *New Document*) and Dong Zhongshu’s 董仲舒 *Chunqiu Fanlu* (春秋繁露; *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn*), all of them render it as the more moderate “when one alters traditional practices and changes normality” (*biangǔ yichang* 變古易常) and the like.<sup>66</sup>

Researchers often interpret the word “*gǔ*” as “the antiquity” or “the past.” While such readings are appropriate in various contexts, here I choose to read it as “traditional practices” because in the *Zhao Zheng shu*, the scribe(s) adopted the character “*gǔ*” to express the nondistant past. For instance, it is stated that “King Jian of Qi thereupon killed his faithful vassals of earlier generations” 齊王建遂殺其古(故)世之忠臣. Additionally, in the transmitted texts, the clause “*biangǔ yichang*” 變古易常 appears as frequently as “*biangǔ luanchang*” to denote a change or disturbance in normality, which suggests that *gǔ* and *gù* likely bear a similar meaning.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, in the context of “*biangǔ luanchang*” 變古亂常, the word “*gǔ*” refers less to the practices of the remote past than those of a more recent tradition.<sup>68</sup>

The Simas’ citation of “*biangǔ luanchang*” in their remark reveals that they did not completely go against the concept that the alteration of certain traditional

65 *Shiji* 101.3327.

66 For the appearances of this line in some of the transmitted Warring States and Western Han texts, see Waseda Daigaku kanpaku kenkyūkai 2018: 101, n. 3.

67 For examples of “變古易常,” see *Guanzi* 31.574; *Yi Zhoushu* 61.963; *Xinshu* 1.31; *Shuo Yuan* 15.367.

68 It is worth noting that the term “常古” frequently appears in the text of an unprovenanced Warring States manuscript called \**Jiandawang po han* 東大王泊旱 in the possession of the Shanghai Museum. On account of its context, the “古” of “常古” should be read as “故” rather than the past or the antiquity. The following passage is particularly relevant to this matter: “The Prefect of Sacrifices is in charge of [affairs pertaining to the] ancestral ghosts and spirits of the Chu state, and he did not dare to disturb the permanent and traditional practices concerning the ancestral ghosts and spirits for the sake of his lord’s body” 贊(釐)尹為楚邦之祝(鬼)神室(主), 不敢以君王之身亵(變)亂鬼神之崇(常)古(故); see *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu (si) duben*: 75, strips nos. 21, 6. Like the Peking University collection, the authenticity of looted Warring States manuscripts, such as those in the possessions of the Shanghai Museum and Tsinghua University, were occasionally in question; see, for example, Chu Ki-Cheng 朱歧祥 2016. For discussions of the genuineness and possible provenance of the Shanghai Museum collection, see Richter 2011: 21–23 and Allan 2015: 51–55; both consider these manuscripts to be authentic.

practices arouses calamity.<sup>69</sup> It should be noted that in the Western Zhou period, people began to perceive the antiquity as something authoritative. Thinkers in the Warring States and Western Han periods often referred to the ancient, former time as a lost golden age, using events and practices of the past as a tool to authenticate their discourses. The word “*gǔ*” is often denoted only an abstract, unspecific period in the past. By the time of the *Shiji* authors, the common wisdom was that the past was not merely an objective temporal phenomenon. Instead, it was something that needed to be revered and maintained.<sup>70</sup> Along this line of thought, traditional practices, which emanated from the beliefs and customs of the past, also became a positive social value.<sup>71</sup> While the Simas’ attitude toward traditional practices seemed to at times be complex and ambivalent,<sup>72</sup> revering the past was undoubtedly part of their ideology. In view of the commonality between the inserted phrase “because of breakers of traditional practices” in *Shiji* 88 and the Honorable Grand Scribe’s remark on Chao Cuo, the former was likely added by the Simas themselves, even though it might not necessarily have been taken from the *Zhao Zheng shu*.

Taking one step further, if the Simas indeed utilized a text such as the *Zhao Zheng shu*, there are two possible reasons for why they decided to omit the second Li Si memorial in his biographical chapter in the *Shiji*. First, the speech is a remonstrance to the Second Emperor. Thus, it does not suit their narrative that Li Si was an unscrupulous minister who often gave up his principles and ingratiated himself with his master.<sup>73</sup> Second, the quality of this text, as noted above, is

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69 Puett 2001: 188–191.

70 Poo 2008: 85–97.

71 Poo Mu-chou 蒲慕州 2012: 3–9.

72 For a discussion of such ambiguity/ambivalence in the *Shiji*’s narratives, see Puett 2001: 199–202.

73 It is notable that although *Shiji* 6 records that Li Si was jailed and eventually killed because of remonstrating the Second Emperor, he submitted the memorial together with other two high ministers, namely, Feng Quji 馮去疾 and Feng Jie 馮劫. According to the *Shiji*, in the face of their unwarranted imprisonment, both Feng Quji and Feng Jie committed suicide to avoid humiliations, whereas Li Si, hoping to preserve his life, chose to face the interrogation and die dishonorably after suffering painful tortures (this point is expressed more clearly in *Shiji* 87). Contrary to what Grant Hardy has suggested, the fact that Li Si is singled out for his timidity can hardly be considered as a compliment or sympathy for his integrity. Perhaps one can best summarize this in the Honorable Grand Scribe’s own terms: “People all thought [Li] Si the epitome of loyalty and he suffered the five punishments and died. If [we] search for the fundamental truth, it actually differs from the commonly held opinion” 人皆以斯極忠而被五刑死，察其本，乃與俗議之異；see *Shiji* 6.343–344, 87.3109; Nienhauser Jr. 2021: 663; Hardy 1999: 204.

Indeed, to enhance the immoral persona of Li Si, *Shiji* 87 comprises a purportedly fictitious memorial attributed to Li in which he encourages the Second Emperor to unleash his autocratic power to silence all opposing voices. For the questionable authenticity of this memorial, see Schwermann 2014: 1082–1083.



inferior and thus does not warrant a full citation. Perhaps this is why the historiographers decided to condense the central argument of this memorial, merging it with the first admonition of Ziying, who indeed expresses a similar opinion in his second admonition in the *Zhao Zheng shu*.<sup>74</sup> To the extent that the above analysis is somewhat reasonable, it provides a crucial example of how the Simas selected and edited their source.

Nevertheless, such redaction shifts the focus of this remonstrance. In the *Zhao Zheng shu*, the mention of the lords of the states of Zhao, Yan, and Qi emphasizes that their demise is determined by the plots of the Qin grand ministers and the blessing of the spirits of Soil and Grain. Therefore, Huhai should not have killed Meng Tian, a resourceful minister and general, and Fusu, another member of the imperial family. Unlike the redacted *Shiji* version, this narrative does not pay much attention to the detrimental effects of violating traditional practices. To align the text with their belief that the deviation of the past led to the demise of the Qin state, the Simas skillfully turned the central thesis of Ziying's speech into a warning against employing the so-called "breakers of traditional practices (or conventions, precedents)." Their redaction proves that the Simas were more than just editors and compilers but authors with their own ideological agenda and personal opinions.

In sum, Sima Qian and/or Sima Tan presented two main causes for the collapse of the Qin in *Shiji* 88. First and more explicitly, they attributed it to the failure of Qin ministers such as Meng Tian and Li Si, who pursued only their own welfare and did not caution their emperors about their mistakes. Second, through delicate textual redaction (or adaptation of an existing narrative text), they incorporated their ideology that the alteration of traditional practices precipitated state collapse into their source material. In this way, they linked the demise of the Qin Empire to their betrayal of the old way while remaining invisible to their reader.

These two propositions are inextricable. That is, Qin collapsed as quickly as it did because its ministers did not remonstrate their rulers for deviating from the wisdom of Zhou statecraft. This point is specifically exemplified in their remark on Li Si, who received extra blame for his unconditional compliance with his masters. Since Li "knew the fundamentals of the *Six Arts* (viz. the Ruist classics)" 知六藝之歸,<sup>75</sup> he should have been able to assist the rulers in establishing policies that followed the Zhou tenets. For the Simas, the demise of the Qin Empire could have

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<sup>74</sup> In the second admonition, Ziying lists "altering customs and changing the law and order" 夫變俗而易法令 as one of the mistakes that the Second Emperor of Qin made; see strip no. 45 of the *Zhao Zheng shu*.

<sup>75</sup> *Shiji* 87.3108; Nienhauser Jr. 2021: 663. For a discussion of the term "六藝," see Li Changzhi 1963: 54–56; Durrant 1995: 47–48.

been avoided if its rulers received and listened to correct advice and returned to the traditional and legitimate mode of governance. The section below will illustrate how this view likely came from earlier discourses, such as those of Jia Yi, and reveals an important facet of the Simas' beliefs about statecraft.

### 3 *Shiji* 6 and textual transposition

This section examines the reign of the First Emperor of Qin. *Shiji* 6 is the single most crucial account of the collapse of the Qin Empire in the Simas' work. At the end of this chapter, they opted not to ink their own remarks in the “the Honorable Grand Scribe says” section. Rather, they cited a segment from “On the Fault of Qin” by Jia Yi verbatim to illustrate the decisive factors pertinent to the rise and fall of the Qin state.<sup>76</sup> This choice stands out in the *Shiji* and has been a source of confusion. Some scholars suggest that the cited adage “the past remembered is a guide for the future” 前事之不忘，後事之師也 conjures up the Simas' beliefs with regard to the functions and purposes of historical writing.<sup>77</sup> Others equate Jia Yi's viewpoints with those of the Simas and suggest that their citing of “On the Fault of Qin” is a euphemistic means of criticizing the expansionist and uncompassionate policies of Emperor Wu of Han.<sup>78</sup>

Despite all the interesting historiographical implications that one can draw from the above proverb, its function within the context of “On the Fault of Qin” is to illuminate the mistakes of the Qin rulers. Prior to this adage, Jia Yi states that “the First Emperor of Qin was smug and would never ask for advice, letting mistakes run their course and never correcting them” 秦王足己不問，遂過而不變，and the Qin statesmen “said nothing with their mouths tightly shut” 拑口而不言. As a result, “when the three rulers lost the way of governing, the loyal vassals dared not admonish” 是以三主失道，忠臣不敢諫.<sup>79</sup> These charges echo the first proposition concerning the failure of the Qin leadership to candidly remonstrate and accept advice.

The second half of this paragraph centers on the necessity to heed the ancient paragons' mode of governance. Jia Yi contends that in view of the damage caused by the blockages [of advice] and deceptions (*yong bi* 雍蔽),<sup>80</sup> former sage-kings

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<sup>76</sup> *Shiji* 6.350–351.

<sup>77</sup> Kern 2011: 104; van Ess 2014: 43–44. The translation of the proverb is taken from Nienhauser Jr. 2018: 293.

<sup>78</sup> Chen Kanli 2018: 157.

<sup>79</sup> *Shiji* 6.350–351; the translation is taken from Nienhauser Jr. 2018: 292 with minor emendations.

<sup>80</sup> For a glossary of the term “*yong bi*,” see Satō 1997: 101–102.

(*xian wang* 先王) established dukes (*gong* 公), ministers (*qing* 卿), grandees (*dafu* 大夫), and knights (*shi* 士) to help them institute law and punishment. Jia continues by presenting three scenarios illustrating these aristocrats' relationship with the ruler. The first scenario occurred when the central authority was strong. At that time, the dukes, ministers, grandees, and knights stopped the violence, punished the unlawful, and pacified everyone in the realm. The second scenario occurred when the central authority was weak, during which aristocrats such as the Five Hegemons (*wu ba*; 五伯) led other regional lords and maintained Zhou order.<sup>81</sup> The last scenario occurred when the territory of the central authority shrank. Jia Yi indicates that with the help of the aristocrats, the central authority was defended from within. Even if the nobles were aligned with an invader, their actions still preserved the "altars to the Grain and Soil." In sum, Jia's assessment of the Zhou multistate system is overtly positive, grounded in the belief that it allowed the Zhou kings to attain "proper ways of governing and their reign lasted more than one-thousand years without interruption" 故周五(王)序得其道, 而千餘歲不絕.<sup>82</sup>

In contrast, for Jia Yi, the Qin rulers did not learn from the sage-kings' wisdom and failed to "observe [the statecraft] in the antiquity and test it in his generation" 觀之上古, 驗之當世.<sup>83</sup> The arrogance of the Qin rulers contributed to the brevity of their rule. This critique mirrors the second proposition raised in the last section, which is that the Qin collapsed because they broke with traditional practices. Taken together, the cited passages serve not as a personal statement but a synthesis of the two gravest errors committed by the Qin leadership.

Despite their commonalities, there are discrepancies between the discourses of the Simas and Jia Yi. In "On the Fault of Qin," Jia Yi entertains that the reason for the rapid demise of Qin is that "benevolence and righteousness were not exerted [on its people] and the offensive and defensive conditions were different" 仁義不施而攻守之勢異也.<sup>84</sup> In addition, he lists the reestablishment of regional states, simplification of laws and alleviation of inhumane corporal punishments,

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<sup>81</sup> Nienhauser Jr. 2018: 292 renders the passage "其弱也, 五伯征而諸侯從" as "When it was weak, the Five Hegemons campaigned [against each other], but the feudal lords listened [to the king]." However, such a reading does not do justice to Jia Yi's opinions toward the Five Hegemons. A preceding passage of "On the Fault of Qin" states that "When the Chou court declined and the Five Hegemons died, orders could not be carried out throughout the world" 周室卑微, 五霸既歿, 令不行於天下 (Ibid: 297). Thus, Jia's assessment of the Five Hegemons seemed to be quite positive, holding the view that it was after their era that Zhou order finally collapsed. In this light, "其弱也, 五伯征而諸侯從" likely means "when it was weak, the Five Hegemons went on military expeditions [to maintain order] and regional lords followed their lead."

<sup>82</sup> *Shiji* 6.351; Nienhauser Jr. 2018: 293.

<sup>83</sup> *Shiji* 6.351; the translation is modified from Nienhauser Jr. 2018: 293.

<sup>84</sup> *Shiji* 6.355; the translation is modified from Nienhauser Jr. 2018: 296. For a detailed summary of Jia Yi's arguments, see Shelach 2014: 115–118.

abolition of confiscating convicts' families, giving out relief to the poor, and reduction of statutory labor service as possible measures through which the Second Emperor of Qin could have corrected his father's mistakes.<sup>85</sup> Here, Jia did not pinpoint which of the above measures was the key to saving the Qin Empire from its demise.

However, the Simas seemed to regard Jia's first proposition, i.e., reinstating a multistate political system, as the crux to a return to the right statecraft.<sup>86</sup> Like Jia Yi, the *Shiji* authors were cautious about the centrifugal force caused by the strong regional kingdoms and shared the view that they had to be divided. However, this does not imply that in their minds, the Zhou multistate system was a total liability. As Hans van Ess observes, they believed that the enfeoffment of manifold small regional kingdoms, each of which had a functional, independent bureaucracy and income, could protect the central government during times of crisis.<sup>87</sup> In addition, they found that Qin's abolition of regional kingdoms at least partly accounted for the empire's demise.<sup>88</sup> Along this line, it is rather natural that the Simas would suggest that the reestablishment of regional kingdoms might have saved the Qin regime. This idea is expressed in their preface to *Shiji* 16, the "Monthly Table of the Qin-Chu Interregnum" (Qin Chu zhi ji yuebiao; 秦楚之際月表):

秦既稱帝，患兵革不休以有諸侯也。於是無尺土之封，墮壞名城，銷鋒鏑，鉏豪桀，維萬世之安。……鄉秦之禁，適足以資賢者為驅除難耳。<sup>89</sup>

**85** The original text reads: “裂地分民以封功臣之後，建國立君以禮天下，虛囹圄而免刑戮，除去收帑汙穢之罪，使各反其鄉里，發倉廩，散財幣，以振孤獨窮困之士，輕賦少事，以佐百姓之急。” See *Shiji* 6.357; for a translation see Nienhauser Jr. 2018: 298.

Nylan 2018: 77–80 posits that both Jia Yi and Sima Qian believe in the theory of “time change” and agree that “rulers do not always have to follow the Zhou way to be effective.” Although Nylan is right that Jia Yi admitted that Qin's failure was avoidable if its rulers exercised a benevolent rule, and that a ruler must adapt changes over time, these propositions do not necessarily imply that he suggested abandoning the Zhou way. Rather, Jia, whose views are endorsed by the Simas, explicitly connected Qin's rapid demise to its failure to follow the Zhou way. Instead of instituting an entirely new model, Jia posited that the ruler must look back at the former kings' policies and choose those suitable for the current generation; this sets him apart from the historical evolution that is typical among “Legalist” thinkers. Moreover, Nylan makes no mention of the passages in relation to Jia Yi's idea of reestablishing regional states and his critiques on the danger of deviating from the Zhou tenet. In this respect, her proposition does not totally conform to what Jia and the Simas expressed in their narratives. For a more balanced overview of Jia Yi's propositions, see Leung 2019: 133–139, esp. 134–135.

**86** For other discrepancies between *Shiji* 6 and “On the Fault of Qin,” see Tzuruma 2009: 196–202.

**87** van Ess 2014: 174–175.

**88** van Ess 2014: 191.

**89** *Shiji* 16.922.

When [King Zheng of] Qin already declared himself as the Thearch, he worried that the incessant warfare was due to the existence of regional lords.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, he enfeoffed not even a *chi* of land, destroyed [the fortifications of] famous cities, melted down blades and arrowheads, and eradicated vigilantes and strongmen, thereby maintaining eternal peace ... Formerly, Qin's proscriptions happened to serve to assist the worthies in removing their obstacles.

Note that an almost identical set of measures (except “to eradicate vigilantes and strongmen”) is also listed in *Shiji* 87 as those reforms with which Li Si was associated.<sup>91</sup> In the above preface, the Simas' message is even clearer: These measures only paved the way for the Han founders to act against the regime and ascend the throne. The rationale here is that Qin's policies such as the abolition of the multistate system and the destruction of the fortifications of selected cities in the new territories in turn weakened its defense and state power. The idea that a multistate system would have served as a potential obstacle for the Han founder implies that its existence could have averted the Qin's collapse.

Indeed, throughout the narrative of *Shiji* 6, one recurrent theme is the controversy surrounding the choice between the Zhou multistate model and the Qin commandery-county system. Shortly after the founding of the Qin Empire (221 BCE), the *Shiji* narrates a court debate between the Chancellor Wang Wan 王綰 and Li Si, then the Commandant of Court (*ting wei* 廷尉) on the reestablishment of regional lords (*zhuhou* 諸侯) in distant new territories. In the end, the proposal of Li Si, who advocated the universal implementation of the centralized commandery-county system, prevailed.<sup>92</sup>

The narrator's tone becomes much more dismissive in the catalyzing incident for the notorious biblioclasm eight years later (213 BCE). Although it is one of the most well-known stories recorded in the *Shiji*, I still briefly recount this account for the subsequent discussion.<sup>93</sup> The text can be divided into three sections according to the anchors of the speeches. The first section features a Supervisor (*pu ye* 僕射) named Zhou Qingchen 周青臣 who, at a state feast, presents a flattering eulogy to

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**90** Michael Nylan interprets this line as “Sima Qian principally blames the Qin rulers for continuing, after unification, to employ troops ‘unceasingly’ (*bu xiu* 不休), which failure virtually guaranteed the rise of the Han founder, in his view”; see Nylan 2018: 80. Such a reading, however, is likely misguided as the subject of this sentence is clearly “Qin” rather than Sima Qian and what “*bingge bu xiu*” refers to is probably the endemic warfare prior to the unification. van Ess 2014: 53 translates this sentence as follows: “Als [der Erste Erhabene von] Ch'in sich dann zum Kaiser ausrief, da fürchtete er, daß der Grund dafür, daß die Truppenbewegungen nicht aufgehört hatten, darin zu suchen sei, daß es Lehnsfürsten gegeben hatte”; this is more accurate.

**91** *Shiji* 87.3090.

**92** *Shiji* 6.307.

**93** For more detailed summaries of the event recorded in the *Shiji*, see Bodde 1986: 73; Giele 2019: 205–212.



the August Thearch, praising his accomplishment of turning regional kingdoms into commanderies and counties. The protagonist of the second section is Chunyu Yue 淳于越, an Erudite (*bo shi* 博士) from the Qi 齊 region. The third and last section comprises a memorial of Chancellor Li Si, in which he recommends banning all private learning and burning private book collections except for those sanctioned by the state.<sup>94</sup> Li's proposal is approved by the First Emperor.

Similar to the technique they employed in *Shiji* 88, the Simas encoded their opinions on the Qin's fall through the speech of Chunyu Yue:

臣聞殷周之王千餘歲，封子弟功臣，自為枝輔。今陛下有海內，而子弟為匹夫，卒有田常、六卿之臣，無輔拂，何以相救哉？事不師古而能長久者，非所聞也。今青臣又面諛以重陛下之過，非忠臣！

Your servant heard that Yin and Zhou were able to rule over one thousand years because they enfeoffed their sons, brothers, and meritorious ministers, who made themselves branches supporting [the central authority]. Now your majesty owns all within the seas, but your sons and younger brothers are all ordinary men. If in the end there were vassals such as Tian Chang and the six ministers [of Jin], how could others save you [when you have] neither support nor assistance? I have never heard that a cause could exist for long without modeling on traditional practices.<sup>95</sup> Now [Zhou] Qingchen has also aggravated your majesty's mistakes by flattering you face to face; he is not a loyal vassal!<sup>96</sup>

Consider the last two sentences in the above speech. The second-to-last highlights the disastrous effect of altering traditional practices, followed by the rebuke of Zhao Qianchen's flattery to the First Emperor. In other words, each of these two sentences refers to one aspect of the Qin's fall mentioned above. The strong resemblance of this speech with their own ideological agenda probably caused the Simas to choose this anecdote to portray the pivotal moment in Qin history. Chunyu's speech is followed by Li Si's suggestion to proscribe private learning and the First Emperor's approval of this proposal. Such a setting embodies the Qin leadership's rejection of their subordinate's apt advice.<sup>97</sup>

94 *Shiji* 6.325–326.

95 Similar to the “*gǔ*” in “*biangǔ yichang*,” here I render “*shī gǔ*” (師古) as “modeling on traditional practices.” Other possible interpretations include “to take the past as a teacher,” or “to model oneself after the past” (I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing these alternatives to my attention). However, as noted above, “past” and “tradition” were two inextricable concepts. Specifically, for the Han, epochs such as Shang and Western Zhou were already “*gǔ*.” In this respect, understanding “*gǔ*” as either “the past” or “traditional practices” does not affect my argument; that is, Chunyu Yue's speech reflects the Simas' favoring of Zhou statecraft, especially its multistate system.

96 The translation is modified from Nienhauser Jr. 2018: 267.

97 Puett 2001: 190.

In addition to functioning as a prophecy foreshadowing the fall of Qin, Chunyu's speech announces a quasi-ultimatum for the Qin regime. If the First Emperor accepted his rightful advice, his empire could have been saved from the anti-Qin movement that would arise in the near future. At the crossroads of Qin history, Li Si and the First Emperor not only missed the final opportunity to reinstate the correct multistate system but also further abandoned traditional values. This double fault made the demise of the Qin Empire inevitable. In this narrative, the Simas not only articulated their two propositions on the Qin's fall through the words of an interlocutor but also authenticated such claims through the words and actions of Li Si and the First Emperor, which is a common narrative tactic of the *Shiji*.<sup>98</sup>

However, this account is not seamless. Although the narration is logical and coherent overall, traces of transposition can still be detected by comparing the text of Li Si's putative speech with unearthed Qin legal ordinances. This allows us to examine how the Simas created this crucial narrative. I argue that the Li Si speech on the banning of private learning is a combination of an anecdotal speech attributed to him and an actual imperial decision (*zhi shu* 制書) initiated by the historical Li Si.

*Shiji* 6 encompasses an astonishing breadth of primary sources. Possible material includes the *Records of Qin* (*Qin ji* 秦記) chronicle, administrative documents such as decrees, ritual texts written on stelae, and anecdotes originally transmitted in oral and written traditions.<sup>99</sup> As for the possible source for the proscription of private learning, scholars have noted that the Simas likely made use of the texts of Qin memorials kept in the Han imperial library.<sup>100</sup> However, the story does not end here. I suggest that the so-called Li Si speech is derived from two separate texts of different origins and credibility. The first subsection opens with the line, "the Chancellor Li Si said" 丞相李斯曰, whereas the second subsection opens with "the Chancellor, your servant [Li] Si, braves death to report" 丞相臣斯昧死言.

This peculiar setting suggests that subsections one and two may originally have been two disparate texts. First, despite their thematic resemblance, the contents of the two subsections are convoluted. For example, at the end of the first subsection, Li Si says: "Now these scholars do not model the present [way] but

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<sup>98</sup> Durrant 1994: 41.

<sup>99</sup> Fujita 2016: 230.

<sup>100</sup> The "Treatise on Literature" (Yiwen Zhi 藝文志) chapter of *Hanshu* lists a book titled *Memorials* (Zou Shi 奏事), which constitutes twenty *pian* concerning "the memorials of the Qin ministers, as well as the inscriptions of stelae on the famous mountains" 秦時大臣奏事, 及刻石名山文也. Since *Shiji* 6 includes the stele inscriptions of the First Emperor, it is probable that the Simas also accessed the texts of those Qin memorials, which include the Li Si memorial discussed here. For the *Memorials* as one of the possible primary sources of *Shiji*, see Durrant 1994: 32.



learn from the past, with which they criticize the current generation and confuse the black-headed ones” 今諸生不師今而學古, 以非當世, 惑亂黔首. A strong sense of *déjà vu* can be felt when we compare this line with the second sentence of subsection two, which reads: “Every speech [of the hundred schools] talked about the past to harm the present [system] and elaborated empty words to confuse reality” 語皆道古以害今, 飾虛言以亂實.

The focus between the two subsections also differs. In the first subsection, Li Si berated Chunyu Yue and those “scholars” (*zhu sheng* 諸生) whereas the second one attacks private learning (*si xue* 私學) or, more specifically, thinkers who disagreed with the state using their academic training. Indeed, it is contradictory that the Li Si in subsection two would propose that the manuscript collections of those erudites be spared from the book burning while vehemently pillorying them several lines earlier. The two subsections seemingly lack cohesion. It is strange that Li Si, a skilled writer and an experienced orator, would make such amateur mistakes.

The heterogeneity of subsections one and two becomes more obvious when we investigate the lexicon and structure of their respective texts. It is evident that the language of subsection two is distinct from the preceding part. As an administrative document, each imperial decision had to accord with rigid formulaic language and structure. These features mark the peculiarity of the language of such texts. Comparing the text of subsection two with unearthed Qin ordinances, which are presumably modified from imperial decisions,<sup>101</sup> one immediately feels that the former was probably extracted from a legitimate Qin imperial decision. The text of subsection two reads as follows:

丞相臣斯昧死言：古者天下散亂，莫之能一，是以諸侯并作。語皆道古以害今，飾虛言以亂實。人善其所私學，以非上之所建立。今皇帝并有天下，別黑白而定一尊，私學而相與非法教。人聞令下，則各以其學議之，入則心非，出則巷議，夸主以為名，異取以為高，率群下以造謗。如此弗禁，則主勢降乎上，黨與成乎下；禁之，便。

臣請：史官非秦記，皆燒之。非博士官所職，天下敢有藏詩、書、百家語者，悉詣守、尉，雜燒之。有敢偶語詩、書者，棄市；以古非今者，族。吏見知不舉者，與同罪。令下三十日不燒，黥為城旦。所不去者，醫藥、卜筮、種樹之書。若欲有學法令，以吏為師。

制曰：可。

The Chancellor, your servant, [Li] Si braves death to report: In the past, all-under-heaven was divided and in disorder, and none was able to unify it; therefore, the regional lords concurrently rose [to vie for hegemony]. Every speech [of the hundred schools] talked about tradition to harm the present system and elaborated empty words to confuse reality. Each cherished what he had acquired from private learning to criticize what the rulers had

101 Hirose 2010: 146–158; Staack 2020: 186–187.

established. Now the August Thearch, having united and grasped all-under-heaven, has distinguished between black and white and established a single authority. But people who learned privately join together to criticize the laws and instructions. Upon hearing that an ordinance has been issued, each discusses it according to his learning. Entering [the court], they criticize it in their hearts; exiting, they discuss it on the streets. They discredit the ruler to make frame, alienate their interest to establish condescension, and lead their followers to invent slander. If things as such are not prohibited, the ruler's power will be diminished above and factions will form below. The proscription of [these behaviors] is advantageous.

Your servant petitions: Should the records in the Scribes' offices not be that of the Qin, in every case, burn them. Should people not be associated with an Erudite's office but dare to keep songs, documents, and speeches of the hundred schools in all-under-heaven, all [these people must bring their collections to] reach the Governors and Commandants, who should jointly burn the submitted books. Should there be persons who dare to discuss songs and documents, execute them in the marketplace; should [there be persons who dare to] use the past to criticize the present, execute them together with his clan. Should officials witness or know this crime yet fail to prosecute it, share the punishments with the offenders. Should people not [burn their collections] thirty days after this ordinance has been handed down, tattoo them and make them wall-builders. What are exempted are documents of medicine, divination, and horticulture. If people desire to learn laws and ordinances, assign officials as their instructors.

The imperial decision says: Approved.<sup>102</sup>

Stylistically, in the Qin and Western Han administrative language, the expression “to brave death to report” (*meisi yan* 昧死言) was the formal salutation exclusively reserved for memorials submitted to emperors.<sup>103</sup> The validity of this protocol is confirmed by both transmitted and unearthed materials. Among the known Liye manuscripts, for instance, there is one fragment that begins with this formula.<sup>104</sup> More exemplars can be found in citations of memorials submitted to either the emperor or the empress dowager in standard histories.<sup>105</sup> In contrast, the opening line in subsection one, which reads “The Chancellor Li Si said,” is stylistically faulty in three respects. First, it does not employ the formal salutation “to brave death to report.” Second, it omits the self-deprecatative pronoun “your servant” (*chen* 臣), which is unseen in extant specimens of Qin imperial decrees.<sup>106</sup> Third, it

**102** The translation here refers to Nienhauser Jr. 2018: 268. It is worth mentioning that *Shiji* 87 only includes a truncated version of subsection two. For a comparison of the differences between the above text and that in *Shiji* 87, see Bodde 1967: 80–84.

**103** Giele 2006: 86–87, 92–93; Olberding 2012: 50.

**104** *Liye Qin jian du jiaoshi* 2018, 397, slip no. 9-1942+9-2299.

**105** For an enumeration of the memorials containing the phrase in standard histories, see Giele 2006: 123–125, 127–128.

**106** In addition to the ordinance cited below, I have consulted the following specimens: Chen Songchang 2018: 169, strip no. 244(3); 2020: 179–180, strips nos. 252–255.

contains the full name of the sender, which is opposite to the principle that Cai Yong 蔡邕 mentioned in his *Duduan* 獨斷.<sup>107</sup> In terms of formulaic language, subsection two follows the style of Qin administrative writing much more than its preceding subsection.

Structurally, the placement of the line “your servant petitions” in subsection two is consonant with other contemporaneous imperial decisions. The ordinance in the Yuelu Academy collection below is one of the better examples displaying the structure of these texts:

•廿六(九)<sup>108</sup>年四月己卯,丞相臣狀、臣綰受制相(湘)山上:自吾以天下已并親撫晦(海)內,南至蒼梧,凌涉洞庭之水,登相(湘)山、屏山,其樹木野美;望駱翠山以南,樹木□<sup>109</sup>見亦美。其皆禁勿伐。

臣狀、臣綰請:其禁樹木盡如禁苑樹木,而令蒼梧謹明為駱翠山以南所封刊。臣敢請。

制曰:可。·廿七<sup>110</sup>

In the twenty-ninth year, on the *jimao* (sixteenth) day of the fourth month, Chancellors and your servants Zhuang and Wan received the imperial decision on the Mount Xiang[, which states]: Since I have been comforting the realm in person [in the wake of] the unification of all-under-heaven, in the south I have arrived in Cangwu [commandery], overridden and waded across the Dongting [lake]’s water, and climbed up to Mount Xiang and Mount Ping, whose trees are luxuriant and gorgeous; glancing at the places south of Mount Luocui, their trees were also gorgeous when I (overlooked?) them. [I decree to] proscribe the logging of all the [trees in the aforementioned mountains].

**107** Giele 2006: 154–155.

**108** As noted by the editors, the character “六” is likely a mistake and the correct character should be “九” or “八.” See Chen 2017: 76, n. 68. Considering that Qin just subdued the resilient Chu state in the twenty-fifth year (222 BCE) and launched a series of reforms to start a new epoch in 221 BCE, it is hardly conceivable that the First Emperor would or could visit the politically unstable former Chu region in the same year. Since the graph “六” is much more congruous with “九” than “八” in the Qin clerical script, the former character seems more probable.

**109** Chen Wei 陳偉 2018 suggests that this graph is “頰” (*fu*; “to overlook”), which is adopted in the tentative translation below.

**110** For the photo and transcription of this ordinance, see Chen Songchang 2018: 57–58, strips nos. 56–58. As is the case with the Peking University collection, the Qin manuscripts purchased by the Yuelu Academy are also an unprovenanced collection that was probably looted from a tomb. The authenticity of the Yuelu corpus can be supported through codicological features such as verso lines and mirror-inverted imprints of writing. To date, there is no information about the location of the tomb and other tomb inventories. However, the entries of three event calendars (*zhiri* 質日) in the collection suggest that the occupant was likely a scribe serving in a county in the Nan 南 commandery in the southern part of present-day Hubei; see Lau/Staack 2016: 12–14.

Chancellors and your servants Zhuang and Wan petition: [The measures to] proscribe [the logging of] these trees should all equate to their counterparts in the forbidden gardens, and we suggest to order the [governor of] Cangwu to seal and mark those places south of Mount Luocui carefully and explicitly. Your servants presume to petition.

The imperial decision says: Approved. [Ordinance number] 27.

Judging by its paratext, this ordinance should not be far removed from the original imperial decision, except for the omission of formulaic expressions such as “to brave death to report.”<sup>111</sup> Given the venue of its promulgation and the informality of the occasion, the first part of this ordinance likely originated from verbal communication between the First Emperor and his chancellors (possibly involving other members of the entourage as well), which was later reworked into a written statement. Notably, this ordinance records a scenario that contradicts an anecdote recorded in *Shiji* 6, where the First Emperor issued a decree to denude Mount Xiang after his travel was delayed by a strong wind when his entourage arrived at the shrine of a local mountain god called the Lord of Xiang (Xiang Jun 湘君). This ordinance may confirm the earlier suspicion that this event may be based on an unreliable anecdotal account that does not reflect historicity.<sup>112</sup>

The structure between this ordinance and subsection two is synonymous. Both texts introduce issues that the senders aim to resolve with their proposals. This part is followed by the formulaic line “your servant(s) X petition,” which opens the solution section. Both texts then end with the line “the imperial decision says: Approved.” Such an expression was the standard formula closing an imperial decision or imperial instruction (*zhao shu* 詔書), as it shows that the preceding content was endorsed by the highest authority.

Apart from the format, the terminology in subsection two also reveals its official nature. One notable example is the term “to be tattooed and made a wall-builder” (*qing wei chengdan* 黥為城旦), which referred to a combined punishment (the corporal punishment “tattooing” and the status punishment “wall-builder”) that was prevalent before the abolition of corporal punishments from the penal system in 167 BCE. Based on my own counting, the punishment “*qing wei chengdan*” appears at least 84 times in the *Shuihudi*, *Longgang*, *Yuelu*, and

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**111** As Thies Staack demonstrates, when the text of an imperial decision (decree) was reworked into an ordinance and a statute, its paratextual frames such as titles, involved persons, dates would be significantly truncated; see Staack 2020: 188–222. Given that the above Qin ordinance retains most of these paratextual frames, its text is likely similar to its original form.

**112** See Bodde 1986: 98.

Zhangjiashan corpora of legal texts, which date to the Qin and early Western Han period.<sup>113</sup> However, after the abolition of corporal punishments, this term became so obscure that the passage cited above is its only appearance in the transmitted *Shiji* (excluding the quotation of a similar text in *Shiji* 87).<sup>114</sup> Another example is the line “to share the punishment with the offender” (*yu tongzui* 與同罪), which occurs 44 times in the aforementioned unearthed legal texts but only once in the *Shiji*.<sup>115</sup> These lexical features confirm the idiosyncrasies of subsection two’s language in the *Shiji* corpus. In fact, that *Shiji* 87 only cites an abbreviated version of subsection two also indicates its own separate entity from subsection one.

In summary, the coherent use of the Qin administrative and legal language in subsection two of the putative Li Si memorial reveals its status as a legitimate imperial decision.<sup>116</sup> In contrast, the lexicon of subsection one lacks these distinctive formal characteristics. For instance, the adjective “*yu*” (愚; “foolish,” “ignorant”) that appears in subsection one<sup>117</sup> is widely found in nonofficial texts but is rarely used in a legal or administrative context except for self-deprecation.<sup>118</sup> Given that the sections prior to subsection two consist mostly of speeches, they resemble the characteristics of the “document” genre, whose later specimens such as those that emerged in the Warring States and Western Han dynasty are often of dubious historical value. Perhaps this is why the *Shiji* authors cited only the text of

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**113** This term occurs 12 times in the Shuihudi Qin legal corpus, three times in the highly fragmentary Longgang corpus, at least 28 times in the Yuelu corpus (incl. v. 3–6), and 41 times in the Zhangjiashan corpus.

**114** The result is generated through the “Hanji dianzi wenxian” 漢籍電子文獻 database developed by the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica (<http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/>), accessed 25 October 2020.

**115** This term occurs two times in the Shuihudi corpus, six times in Longgang, at least 16 times in Yuelu (incl. v. 3–6), and twenty times in Zhangjiashan.

**116** In theory, subsection two could have been made up by someone who had deep knowledge of Qin administrative culture and language. While one cannot completely deny such a possibility, in practice it is extremely difficult to emulate every aspect of an actual imperial decision consistently. For example, the *Zhao Zheng shu* also includes a putative imperial decision, which comprises the line “The Chancellor, your servant, [Li] Si braves death and bows his head to report” 丞相臣斯昧死頓首言. It should be noted that in the Qin and Han periods, the term “to bow one’s head” (*dunshou* 頓首) was prevalent in the opening formula of private and sometimes official letters but not in the memorials to the emperor. In other words, despite acquiring a certain level of administrative knowledge, the scribe(s) producing the text still could not fully tally with the style of a memorial.

**117** The original sentence reads as follows: “Now Your Majesty has founded this edifice and attained merit which will last for ten thousand generations; this is surely not that which an ignorant Ru can understand” 今陛下創大業，建萬世之功，固非愚儒所知。

**118** The detailed quantitative analysis of Christian Schwermann also shows that the word “*yu*” appears much more frequently in philosophical and masters’ texts than those of canonical and technical characters; see Schwermann 2011: 119–131.



subsection two in the *Shiji* 87 since they also realized that it is a more reliable source than subsection one.

Such a textual transposition completely shifts the original context of the imperial decision in subsection two. While imperial decisions could be formulated verbally, their promulgations had to be in written form. More importantly, as shown in the abovementioned Qin imperial decision in the Yuelu collection, imperial decisions are not necessarily verbatim transcriptions of actual court discussions or direct citations of memorials submitted by ministers. An “Ordinance pertaining to Accessory [Scribes]” (*zu ling* 卒令) in the Yuelu Academy collection reveals interesting details about this aspect of legal ordinances.<sup>119</sup> The text reads as follows:

• 令曰：諸所上而為令，詔曰可，皆以書下日定其奏日下之。<sup>120</sup>

The ordinance says: Those submitted [affairs] that make ordinances, when the [emperor] announces: ‘approved,’ in every case, decide their dates of submission in accordance with the dates on which the documents are handed down and [thereafter] hand them down [as ordinances].

Accordingly, the date of submission written on the promulgated ordinance is not the actual date when an affair is reported to the emperor; rather, it is the date on which the required administrative processes have been completed. This finding shows that the contents of ordinances (and their predecessors, imperial decisions) do not necessarily reflect reality; their main objective is to show the standard procedure for the emperor’s decision-making.<sup>121</sup> Although an imperial decision may comprise the text of a speech or a memorial submitted by a minister (or several ministers), its normative nature differentiates it from what it cites. However, the presentation of this imperial decision in *Shiji* 6 almost turns the memorial into an extemporized oral speech in response to Chunyu Yue’s censure of current policies. This puts the imperial decision out of its original context.

One possible compilation process of this account is detailed in the following. The scribe(s) spotted an anecdote and an imperial decision of an analogous leit-motif. Since the imperial decision provided little information on the context for its formulation, the scribe(s) decided to merge the imperial decision with the anecdote to create a more complete narrative. In doing so, he (they) possibly truncated the

<sup>119</sup> Barbieri-Low and Yates translate “*zu ling*” as “accessory ordinances” and relate “*zu*” to “*zu shi*” (卒史; accessory scribe), who was a group of subordinate officials serving under 2000-bushel officials such as ministers and commandery governors; see Barbieri-Low/Yates 2015: 1105–1106, n. 20.

<sup>120</sup> Chen Songchang 2018: 103, strip no. 106.

<sup>121</sup> In this respect, one may even say that these texts are to a certain extent performative.

original anecdote after the line “confuse the black-headed ones” and replaced the second half with the text of the imperial decision. As a result, the text found in the transmitted *Shiji* 6 emerges.

The above analysis demonstrates how the narrative of proscribing private learning is created with a thorough selection and redaction of source material. Although the Qin regime likely imposed a biblioclasm despite its questionable efficacy and dubious impact,<sup>122</sup> the context for its implementation illustrated in *Shiji* 6 is not necessarily a historical fact. The dramatic confrontations between a scholar from the east and an emperor and a minister from the west, between the Ruist and “Legalist” ideologies, and, most importantly, between the Zhou multi-state model and the Qin commandery-county system, should be understood as a deliberate construct.

It is facile to assert that the *Shiji* authors must have framed this narrative. Like the textual abbreviation addressed in the last section, one cannot forget the opportunity that they merely inherited a source that already transposed the imperial decision in the anecdote. That said, given the close connection between the *Shiji* and the *Memorials*, and that primary sources such as Qin imperial decisions probably did not widely circulate in the Han period, it is tenable that the Simas were behind these redactional efforts. If this is the case, it once again illustrates how the historiographers twisted their source material in the process of narrative formation. Even if this is not the case, the citation of this anecdotal account itself indicates the Simas’ approval of its content.

## 4 Contextualization and discussion

Here, I will contextualize the Simas’ ideological agenda examined in the last two sections. In *Shiji* 6 and 88, while the historiographers admit the possibility that the Qin regime could have been redeemed if the Qin emperors had received correct advice from their subordinates and adopted Zhou traditions such as the multistate system, this does not imply that they implicitly disregarded the legitimacy of the Western Han regime.<sup>123</sup>

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**122** While the authenticity of Li Si’s memorial has been questioned, there is no substantial evidence to refute its historicity. In reference to two different assessments on the reliability of this memorial, see Neining 1983: 122–132; Petersen 1995: 5–12.

**123** Li 1994: 368. From a different aspect, Hans van Ess thinks that the Simas attempted to belittle the Han founders by attributing the establishment of the Han dynasty to Qin’s fault and heaven’s mandate rather than the founders’ merits; see van Ess 2014: 55.



It should be noted that the early Western Han rulers were honest about the contingency of their triumph. Given their humble origin, the commonality between the Qin and early Western Han political systems,<sup>124</sup> and above all, the precarious sociopolitical landscape at the formative stage of their empire, the greatest fear of the Han founders was that their empire would replicate the fate of their short-lived predecessor.<sup>125</sup> Such anxiety propelled a sizable body of literature investigating the fault of the Qin in the first few decades of the Han Empire. Most early Han thinkers who explored this issue did not entirely dismiss the significance of the Qin Empire and the possibility that the regime might have lasted longer if it had adopted better policies. They also acknowledged that the Han founders established their empire by chance and might fall as quickly as Qin if they repeated its mistakes. For example, Lu Jia famously met Emperor Gaozu's challenge to the usefulness of the Ruist doctrine by replying that:

秦任刑法不變，卒滅趙氏。鄉使秦已并天下，行仁義，法先聖，陛下安得而有之？<sup>126</sup>

Qin invariably employed punishment and law and in the end, this annihilated the Zhao (viz. the Qin imperial) clan. If, after its unification of all-under-heaven, Qin implemented benevolence and righteousness and modeled the former sages, how can your majesty seize and own [all-under-heaven]?

Here, Lu's warning is clear: Qin's demise was not inevitable. Rather, it was due to its problematic choice of the immoral "Legalist" policy. Emperor Gaozu had to learn from the mistakes of the Qin and adjust to the former sages' way if he wished for the longevity of the Han Empire. Lu's message was well received, and he was requested by Emperor Gaozu to "underline the reason for which the Qin lost the all-under-heaven and that for which I gained it" 著秦所以失天下，吾所以得之者何

<sup>124</sup> For a summary in English, see Nylan 2018: 93–97.

<sup>125</sup> Leung 2018: 161.

<sup>126</sup> *Shiji* 97.3270. It is worthwhile to note that despite the emperor's authority in dictating decisions, government policies were seldom conceived singlehandedly by his own. Rather, it is evident that high-ranking officials such as chancellors, ministers, and commandery governors (*jun shou* 郡守) could initiate policies to the emperor, who often approved them without or with only minor alterations; sometimes high-ranking officials could even venture to modify the emperor's original designs. In this light, the government policies of the Qin and Han empires should be better understood as the collective efforts between the emperor and his aides; see Giele 2006: 47–48. Thus, I write "rulers" and "founders" here in the plural form, including not only Liu Bang (Emperor Gaozu) but also his comrades (e.g., Xiao He 蕭何, Cao Can 曹參, Zhou Bo 周勃, etc.), most of whom did not come from prominent backgrounds.

for his reference.<sup>127</sup> Although this dialogue could be fictional,<sup>128</sup> it nonetheless captures the spirit of the whole “faulting Qin” repertoire; that is, it provides candid counsel for the Han rulers so that they can avoid the missteps of the Qin regime and enable the longevity of their empire.

Indeed, discourses analogous to those of Lu Jia are pervasive in most of the extant treatises of early Han thinkers. Jia Yi articulated such opinions, and so did Jia Shan.<sup>129</sup> The Simas’ discourses were likely developed along this line of scholarly tradition. Yan An 嚴安, a contemporary of Sima Tan and Sima Qian, submitted a memorial ca. 128-127 BCE to warn Emperor Wu of Han of the potential danger of his aggressive expansionist policy.<sup>130</sup> His admonition comprises the following lines:

鄉使秦緩刑罰，薄賦斂，省繇役，貴仁義，賤權利，上篤厚，下佞巧，變風易俗，化於海內，則世世必安矣。<sup>131</sup>

If Qin had softened its punishment, reduced its tax and exploitation, cut its statutory labor and conscription, valued benevolence and righteousness, despised privilege and private interest, advocated candidness and honesty, rejected flattery and deceit, altered the milieu and changed the customs, and thereby transformed [the populace of] all within the sea, then [its realm] would be in peace for eternity.

Yan An’s argument is quite similar to those of Lu Jia, Jia Yi, and the *Shiji*’s authors. We are told that Yan did not receive punishment for his action. Instead, Emperor Wu appreciated his memorial so much that he was appointed Langzhong 郎中 and later promoted to the Prefect of Steeds (qima ling 騎馬令).<sup>132</sup> Yan’s case reveals that

**127** *Shiji* 97.3270.

**128** That said, the prominent status of Lu Jia at the Han central court and his deep involvement with contemporaneous political affairs enhance the credibility of this dialogue. See *Shiji* 97.3269–3272. For a concise biography of Lu Jia in English, see Goldin/Sabattini 2020: 4–5.

**129** For the respective views of Jia Yi and Jia Shan, see Nylan 2018: 77; Emmerich 2006: 67.

**130** Yan An’s memorial documented in the *Hanshu* is undated. The dating here is based on two factors. First, Yan’s writing mentioned the sack of Xiongnu’s ritual and political center, Longcheng (龍城; literally, “City of Dragon”) in 129 BCE, so that its text could not have been inked prior to this date. Second, it is recorded that the submission of this memorial was concurrent with that of Zhufu Yan’s 主父偃, who became active in the Han policy-making beginning in 127 BCE and was killed shortly after that. Taking these two points into account, the most likely date of Yan An’s admonition is ca. 128-127 BCE. Cf. *Hanshu* 6.165; 64a.2802; 64b.2813.

**131** *Hanshu* 64b.2811.

**132** *Hanshu* 64a.2802 and 64b.2814. For the title “qima ling,” *Hanshu* 19a lists it as one of the four prefects taking care of the emperor’s stables. Here, the term “qima” should denote a type of horse trained for riding. For example, *Hanshu* 1b states that Emperor Gaozu forbade merchants to “carry weapons and mount qima” 操兵，乘騎馬 in 200 BCE. *Shiji* 110 also records that in 177 BCE, the Chanyu of the Xiongnu included two “qima” in his gift for Emperor Wen. Hence, “qima ling” likely did not lead any cavalry regiment; its major duty was to manage the stable for the emperor’s “qima.” Hans Bielenstein renders “qima ling” as the “Prefect of the Stables for Riding Horses,” which is accurate but somewhat wordy; see *Shiji* 110.3501; *Hanshu* 1b.65, 19a.729; Bielenstein 1980: 34.

the critical comments voiced in the *Shiji* were neither extraordinary nor transgressive by the standards of Sima Qian's time. That they were deemed inappropriate in the wake of the incessant stigmatization of Qin is a matter of reception and cannot speak for their political incorrectness in the earlier time.

This does not mean that the Simas were not critical of the Han regime, especially of Emperor Wu's costly expansionist policy and economic reforms.<sup>133</sup> Nor do I argue that their ideology completely tallied with the Zhou and Ruist principles.<sup>134</sup> What I suggest is that to assert that the Simas consciously dismissed the legitimacy of the Han regime or hid their grudges against Emperor Wu beneath their Qin-collapse narrative may overlook the scholarly tradition that conceivably made an impact on them.

The way in which the Simas constructed their Qin-collapse narrative takes us to the issue of historical truth in the *Shiji*. The Simas' subjectiveness did not prevent them from believing in the authority and authenticity of their work. In contrast, they, as well as many of their earliest readers and critics, likely maintained that the *Shiji*'s narratives present the truth of the past.<sup>135</sup> After all, both Yang Xiong 揚雄 and Ban Gu 班固 agreed (or conceded) that the *Shiji* is a "true record" (*shi lu* 實錄).<sup>136</sup>

Recently, researchers have revisited the conception of "historical truth" in early Chinese philosophical and rhetorical texts. They point out that the distinction between "history" and "fiction" was unclear in these works. For example, Paul Goldin posits that ancient Chinese thinkers "valued statements about the past that embodied what should have been true, regardless of whether they embodied what was true."<sup>137</sup> Garret Olberding also suggests that insofar as the epistemic quality of

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**133** For a discussion of the *Shiji* authors' critiques on these two subjects, see Leung 2019: ch. 5, esp. 174–176. In addition, Hans van Ess entertains that although the *Shiji* authors approved the necessity of reducing the territories of big regional kingdoms, they were critical of how the Han central court deployed this policy, thinking that it was too harsh and inhumane; see van Ess 2014: 174, 215.

**134** Tamara Chin posits that the narratives constructed in *Shiji* 129 and 110 with regard to the natures of merchants and the Xiongnu suggest that the Simas' attitude toward market and frontier diverts from what the "classical tributary order" stipulates. The internal inconsistency of their narratives "disengages the historiographic act from the normative Zhou order" and was thus erased in the *Hanshu*; see Chin 2014: ch. 3, esp. 144–150.

**135** Durrant 2005: 102.

**136** For a discussion of the notion of "true record" in the Han historiography, see Klein 2018: 261–267.

**137** However, Goldin tends to exclude the Simas from the tradition of prioritizing edifying value to the historical fact; see Goldin 2008: 81–82, 90–91. This seems to underestimate the influence of literary and historical tradition on the Simas. Leese-Messing 2016: 119–122 also contends that the *Shiji* may be the first Chinese historical work that consciously applies source criticism to its

the representations of evidence, namely, concrete particulars, statements of principle, and historical precedent, is reputable, their factual accuracy is of marginal importance.<sup>138</sup> The plausibility of an argument was predicated upon “an impression, or a suggestion, of what is most relevant relating to the truth of the matter.” That is, the extent to which a representation of evidence “reinforced commonly accepted propositions, or dislodged those open to debate.”<sup>139</sup>

These insights call into question the demarcation between “fact” and “fiction” in the *Shiji*. Constructed by the Western Han literary tradition, the Simas likely prioritized a source’s proximity with their ideology and personal knowledge,<sup>140</sup> its didactic value, and its depiction of the zeitgeist of a particular epoch over its factual accuracy. Similar to Ban Biao 班彪 and Ban Gu,<sup>141</sup> Yang Xiong probably managed to access many more *Shiji* sources and anecdotal accounts not utilized by the Simas. In other words, he may have been able to witness a variety of versions revolving around the same event and compare them with those recorded in the *Shiji*. This can explain why he commented that Sima Qian “processed too much fondness and could not bear [to leave out unorthodox items]” (*duo ai bu ren* 多愛不忍) and had a “fondness for the extraordinary” (*ai qi* 愛奇).<sup>142</sup> What Yang referred to may be the *Shiji*’s tendency to choose stories with intriguing plots and exciting details over modest but more probable accounts. The choice of the dramatic “conspiracy at Shaqiu 沙丘” story over more logical accounts such as that in the *Zhao Zheng shu*—in which the Simas likely witnessed a text at least partly akin to its content—exemplifies the historiographers’ preference.

That said, this does not imply that the Simas would arbitrarily choose whatever exciting stories that were available to them. Wang Chong’s 王充 observation below suggests that basic logic still contributed to an account’s plausibility:

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accounts. This indicates that Sima Qian was no longer only a story-teller but also to a certain extent a researcher who connected himself with his sources and, on occasion, explicitly expressed concerns about their credibility to his reader. In contrast, Esther Klein seems to take a less assertive stance regarding the historical truth in the *Shiji*. On the basis of an analysis of Huan Tan’s 桓譚 imaginary interpretation of the *Shiji*, she suggests that Han thinkers (incl. Sima Qian) understand historical truth not as how something “*could* have been but in fact how it *would* have to have been” given certain assumptions and circumstances; see Klein 2018: 287.

**138** Olberding 2012: 157. It is worth noting that although Olberding criticizes Paul Goldin for assuming that ancient Chinese historians “would have had no sense about the ideal of avoiding the commission of factual errors”, what he proposes is not far removed from Goldin.

**139** Olberding 2012: 164–173.

**140** This point is reflected in their preference in texts written in pre-Qin scripts and stories shared by their acquaintances; see Durrant 2005: 94–102.

**141** Durrant 2015: 219–221.

**142** *Fayan*: 507. For alternative renderings of the two remarks, see Nylan 2013: 211, 213; for an alternative reading of *ai qi* see Li 1994: 382–383.

夫識書言始皇還，到沙丘而亡。傳書又言病筑瘡三月而死於秦。一始皇之身，世或言死於沙丘，或言死於秦。

An apocryphal text says that when the First Emperor returned [from his eastern tour], he died when he arrived at Shaqiu. However, an anecdotal document also says that having suffered from the wound [caused by the] *zhu* instrument [thrown by Gao Jianli] for three months, he died in the Qin region. The single body of the First Emperor is said by some to have died in Shaqiu and by others in the Qin region.<sup>143</sup>

The anecdote to which Wang Chong referred is about Gao Jianli's 高漸離 assassination of the First Emperor to avenge his friend Jing Ke's execution that he mentioned earlier in the same chapter.<sup>144</sup> Wang argues that apocryphal texts are more plausible than anecdotes.<sup>145</sup> The shakiness of this claim notwithstanding, Wang revealed the divergent stories that were pertinent to the First Emperor of Qin's death around his time. In the Simas' era, which preceded Wang's lifetime by some two centuries, the level of diversity should have been even higher. We can imagine that anecdotes as absurd as those cited by Wang Chong flooded the imperial manuscript collections and oral traditions that the Simas used. Therefore, the version adapted in the *Shiji* should be an equilibrium between its authors' ideological beliefs, their personal preferences (literary enjoyment), and the credibility of the account (historical value). Additionally, the Simas might have used a more credible source to support an anecdote, thereby creating a more convincing narrative. The balanced selection of sources may contribute to Yang Xiong's "true record" evaluation.

That said, such balance and coherence seem to be maintained only within an individual narrative, which can consist of multiple chapters. Although the narrative that the Simas constructed in the core chapters of Qin collapse (*Shiji* 6, 87, and 88) is more or less consistent and logical, the reader may encounter contradictory accounts in other parts of the *Shiji*. Consider the putative admonition of Li Si that Zhufu Yan 主父偃 cited in *Shiji* 112:

不可。夫匈奴無城郭之居，委積之守；遷徙鳥舉，難得而制也。輕兵深入，糧食必絕，踵糧以行，重不及事。得其地不足以為利也，遇其民不可役而守也。勝必殺之，非民父母。靡弊中國，快心匈奴，非長策也。

<sup>143</sup> *Lun Heng* 4.200–201. This translation is modified from Forke 1962: 261.

<sup>144</sup> *Lun Heng* 4.200.

<sup>145</sup> According to the "Shi zhi" 實知 chapter of the *Lun Heng*, the rhymed apocryphal text that Wang refers to is attributed to Confucius, who purportedly prophesizes: "A man from nowhere will call himself the First Emperor of Qin, who will step in my hall, occupy my bed, reverse my garment and my lower garment, and die when he arrives at Shaqiu" 不知何一男子，自謂秦始皇(\*[g]<sup>w</sup>an)，上我之堂(\*[d]<sup>f</sup>an)，踞我之床(\*k.dzran)，顛倒我衣裳(\*dan)，至沙丘而亡(\*man); see *Lun Heng* 26. 1069.



This cannot be done. The Xiongnu do not dwell in cities or forts and thus have no need to guide their storage; they move like the migration of birds and thus are difficult to catch and subjugate. If we send lightly equipped soldiers to penetrate deeply into their territory, their food supplies will certainly be exhausted, and if we accompany them with their provisions, the baggage will be too encumbered to get the job done. Even if we acquire the Xiongnu's land, we would not be able to make a profit from it, and even if we could encounter their people, it would not be possible to levy them to guide [our defensive line]. If we must kill these people after we have achieved a victory, it does not accord with the way of being a father and mother of commoners. To exhaust and weaken the Central States and bring satisfaction to the Xiongnu is not a long-range policy.<sup>146</sup>

The purpose of this admonition is to dissuade the First Emperor from waging a war on the Xiongnu. Here, Li Si appears to be an honest and worthy minister who dared to exhort his lord's problematic policy. This is in sharp contrast to his image in *Shiji* 87, which portrays him as a timid, selfish, and unscrupulous person incapable of pointing out the mistakes of the First and Second emperors. Therefore, the exclusion of this admonition from the core chapters of the Qin collapse is in line with the Simas' treatment of the second memorial of Li Si in the *Zhao Zheng shu*.

That the Simas did not completely erase this contradictory source indicates that they cared much less about the issue of narrative consistency beyond the core chapters pertinent to their Qin-collapse narrative. In this light, some of the so-called "inconsistencies" in the *Shiji* may result from the Simas' strategy of narrative production and not stem from their ideological belief, editorial errors, or later textual corruption and rewriting.<sup>147</sup> Although the way in which Sima Qian and his father patterned the narrative of Qin collapse confirms the existence of cross-chapter narratives, it seems that they did not strive to maintain a unified narrative throughout the 130 chapters of the *Shiji*.

Such an arrangement should partly be under practical consideration. The colossal scale of the *Shiji* probably made its compiling and copying a nightmare to its users. To visualize the magnitude of this challenge, we may look at the materiality of the *Shiji*'s possible writing material. Hsing I-tien 邢義田 calculates that to materialize all 526,500 characters of the *Shiji* into a manuscript form might have taken approximately 13,855 bamboo or wooden slips, which were the most typical writing supports in Western Han China. The weight of bamboo slips at this number would be ca. 58.33 kg, whereas those made by wood be ca. 101.62 kg. Approximately, 284.31 L of space is required to accompany one copy of such a *Shiji*

<sup>146</sup> *Shiji* 112.3578. The translation is modified from Olberding 2012: 63–64.

<sup>147</sup> That said, this does not mean that these factors do not play their parts in the inconsistency in the *Shiji*. For the possible ideological factors behind these so-called inconsistencies, see Hardy 1994: 34–37; Allen III 1981: 36. For a case of later textual rewriting in the *Shiji*, see Kern 2003a: 303–316.

manuscript.<sup>148</sup> Of course, the volume of a *Shiji* manuscript would considerably reduce if one used a lighter writing support such as silk. Based on the materiality of the Mawangdui silk manuscripts, Fujita Katsuhisa 藤田勝久 estimates that the whole *Shiji* could be stored in a container of ca. 9 L.<sup>149</sup>

Scholars have theorized about the *Shiji*'s writing material. Silk, wood, and bamboo are all possible options.<sup>150</sup> Among them, silk was not an ideal writing material for textual production. Unlike writing on bamboo and wood, scribes could not erase unwanted texts by scraping them off handily with knives when they brushed on silk. This feature increased the cost of redaction, where an iterative process of textual refinement and modification likely occurred, let alone the possibility that the Simas, who did not possess an extraordinary fortune, might not have been able to afford the price for buying the relatively expensive silk in bulk. Given the private nature of the composition of the *Shiji*, even if Sima Qian, or any copyist(s) he employed, might have written the final two clean copies of *Shiji* on silk, bamboo and/or wooden slips likely remained as his and his father's major writing material during their working process.<sup>151</sup>

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**148** Hsing I-tien 2011: 12–13. There are a few alternative estimations concerning the materiality of the *Shiji*. For example, Fujita 2008: 40 suggests that 21,060 bamboo slips were needed to accommodate one copy of the *Shiji*. The figures given in Wilkinson 2018: 790 lie between those of Hsing and Fujita.

**149** Fujita 2008: 40.

**150** For a summary of these hypotheses, see Nienhauser Jr. 2003: 40–41. Notably, Hans van Ess contends that during their writing process, “Ssu-ma and their scribes often had to check sources written on bamboo and then to write them down on silk.” In other words, he seems to assume that silk was the major writing material of the *Shiji* authors and their (possible) aids; see Nienhauser Jr. 2003: 40, n. 5.

**151** Note that *Hanshu* 30 lists three-fourths of the recorded titles in *pian* 篇 and one-fourth in *juan* 卷. Kalinowski 2005: 133, n. 4 contends that *juan* likely served as a codicological unit pertaining to the manuscript, whereas *pian* may designate a textual unit of writing (I thank Thies Staack for bringing this paper to my notice and explaining the relevant content). As Staack 2016: 3–4 has noted, in Liu Xiang's 劉向 memorial reporting his editorial works on the *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策, he revealed that “the remaining rolls of documents stored at the inner [palace] were disarranged and mixed with each other” 中書餘卷錯亂相糅莠. Additionally, an Eastern Han account suggests that when Liu Xiang conducted his tasks, he first created drafts using bamboo slips. After completing his redactional works, he then copied the edited texts on silk. These indicate that both Liu's sources and the working copies he produced were written on bamboo slips. Although the Eastern Han account may not necessarily reflect what Liu Xiang had actually done, it at least bespeaks a contemporaneous, common practice when textual producers had to deal with a large body of heterogeneous texts. Conceivably, bamboo and/or wood still functioned as the primary writing materials during textual production as late as the Eastern Han period; see *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu*: 494.

During textual production, the Simas conceivably dealt with source material and drafts that far exceeded 13,855 bamboo or wooden slips. The enormous volume of their writing material made the concurrent adjustment of contents a precarious task at the outset. These potential difficulties prompt William Nienhauser to postulate that they likely assigned some of the drafting and copying tasks to subordinate officials serving in the office of the Grand Scribe and have developed a labeling system for their source material.<sup>152</sup> However, even with these devices, editing and compiling such a bulky body of texts using bamboo and wood still present large challenges for textual producers. A recent study, for instance, demonstrates the anxiety of government officials in the face of paperwork for preparing annual account books.<sup>153</sup>

Inasmuch as the *Shiji*'s composition and redaction were a much more intricate process than compiling official accounts, which mostly involved the computation and collation of numerical figures,<sup>154</sup> the short-staffed Simas must have at times been plagued by the heterogeneity of their voluminous source material despite their immense talent and knowledge. In this regard, patterning material into various independent narratives may have served as a practical tactic to cope with the material constraint. Conceivably, since the contents of *Shiji* were likely originally transmitted in the form of individual chapters, its early readers might not have even noticed the so-called “inconsistencies” or “ambivalences” across different narrative texts.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper, I have examined the relationship between the Simas and their sources, and, to a larger extent, their ideological agenda and *Shiji*'s authorship by discerning how the narrative of the Qin collapse was created in the *Shiji*. I demonstrate that it was in fact generated from constant rewriting, transposition, and abbreviation of sources according to the authors' ideological agenda and belief. These techniques enable the Simas to incorporate their remarks on the fall of the Qin regime, caused by the deviation from the Zhou tradition and the inability of the Qin leadership to advise and remonstrate, into the historical narrative they eventually created.

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<sup>152</sup> Nienhauser Jr. 2003: 53–58. However, it remains doubtful if Sima Tan and Sima Qian could have commanded or allowed their subordinates to participate in this family project.

<sup>153</sup> Ma 2020: 42–51.

<sup>154</sup> For the types of information required for the Han account books, see Ma 2020: 45–46.

In the redactional process, it is evident that the Simas might have deliberately altered the context of their source material. The narratives in the *Shiji* at times carry the strong opinions and ideological agendas of their authors, who often proclaimed that they strove to perfect existing contradictory narratives and prepare a definitive account of the past. Nonetheless, they were skillful at framing their narratives and were able to make their agenda and opinions almost invisible to their readers. Seeming anonymous, the historiographers succeeded in establishing their authority, in a manner similar to that of the Gentleman (*junzi* 君子) in the *Zuo tradition* on which they modeled. Rather than simply juxtaposing the narratives of their sources, the Simas authored their own narrative, “a patterned past,” of the Qin collapse.

The construction of the Qin-collapse narrative also suggests that the Simas did not attempt to construct a uniform narrative across the *Shiji*. Instead, they focused on patterning various independent narratives—some of which can encompass multiple chapters—whose plausibility is contingent upon their respective internal coherence. Presumably, such a writing strategy might be understood as a compromise made to accommodate the material constraint during the textual production and may be potentially responsible for some of the so-called inconsistencies in the *Shiji*. I raise this point not to undermine the work of Sima Qian and his father. Rather, I believe that by taking a closer look at the texts and the historical context of the *Shiji* and realizing the difficulty of textual production in the early Chinese context, we can learn more about its authorial work, the superb craftsmanship in its historical writing, and, above all, the devotion and thoughts of its authors.

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