

Introduction

My association with the *Shi ji* goes back now some sixty years. My first contact came in the old school system with a textbook entitled *Shi ki tsugan shō* 史記通鑑抄 (Selections from the *Shi ji* and *Zizhi tongjian*). After entering university, I had no choice but to peer into the text, but that was still a far cry from studying it on a daily basis. When considering ancient Chinese history, however, one must make reference, some way or another, to *Shi ji*.

In writing his *Shi ji*, Sima Qian planned to compile an up-to-date, complete history of China. Today, some 2,000 years later, that constitutes only antiquity, one part of China's complete history. His unique historical perspective is no longer current in our time, but nothing has changed regarding the fact that the *Shi ji* remains immensely important, basic material for ancient Chinese history. Reading the *Shi ji* properly, one might even say, is understanding ancient Chinese history properly.

I think it was after leaving university that I had a discussion with a friend who had returned from China. He asked me how many people in Japan were scholars of the *Shi ji*. I was stymied. There were very few philologists of this sort in Japan, and as for studying the *Shi ji*, most dealt with this text from the standpoint of historiography. This was rather a shortcut to understanding the *Shi ji*, apparently a characteristic distinguishing Japanese from Chinese approaches to study of the text.

I have by now written a fair number of pieces on the *Shi ji*. There are at least a few points about which I can confidently say that I read the text in a manner that it was not traditionally read. When I got to the point of discussing

Shi ji for a volume with *Iwanami shinsho* 岩波新書 (Iwanami trade paperbacks), I had two plans running through my mind which were confusing my selection.

One plan was to patch together the articles I had already published and offer them to readers in an easy-to-read style. I couldn't expect that academic articles would be read by too many people, and rewriting them as would befit a simple paperback would surely be meaningful to some extent. The other plan was to come up with a new plan, and using the published essays as little as possible, draft something new from an altogether different angle. Filling a new receptacle like a simple paperback volume, because it was not a prepared source as planned from the outset, there was the danger that it would not fit people's taste. There were, though, limitations of time, and there was thus a kind of adventure to get it done on time.

Once I actually began writing, there was no need for any confusion. What I wanted to write flowed naturally toward material about which I hadn't as yet written. At the same time, however, I was conscious that my descriptions were for a more popular work that would be easy to read and understand. By the same token, compared to something created as a scholarly essay, I was self-conscious that somehow this was going to be insufficient. If those of you reading this book have a similar feeling, you might go a step further and by reading my related essays, the titles of which are listed at the end of this volume,¹ you will be able to use this information to establish your own perspective on the *Shi ji*.

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1 Translator's note: These articles are translated in Part II of this volume.

How to Read the *Shi ji*

How Has the *Shi ji* Been Read?

Chinese Reading Practices

There is no need for an introduction to narrative prose—these are the words of the famous Qing-era historical critic Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738–1801). Anyone can understand a text that describes facts; you just have to understand it as you read and appreciate it as such. There should then be no need for an accompanying explanation of this or that point.

Circumstances are somewhat different in the case of a work written more than 2,000 years ago like the *Shi ji*, and a foreign work from China. For the Chinese people, too, this is the distant past, a chronicle for a society quite different from the present. We need some sort of guidebook to read this work. But, what sort of guidebook to use presents a problem.

More than integrating the entirety of a work and then considering its essential character, the practice of Chinese scholarship has been to lay emphasis on understanding individual details. As a result, it is easily inclined toward exegetical study in reading history—that is, excavating the meaning of language. Already in the Later Han period (25–220), we see the emergence of places difficult to understand in Sima Qian's vocabulary, and a man by the name of Yan Du 延篤 (d. 167) produced a one-fascicle work entitled *Shi ji yinyi* 史記音義 (The meaning of words in the *Shi ji*), and in the Liu-Song era (420–479) in the Southern Dynasties, Xu Guang 徐廣 (352–425) wrote a ten-fascicle work with the same title. There were as well many others at the time who wrote

commentaries on the text, such as Pei Yin 裴駟 (fl. 438), who compiled the *Shi ji jijie* 史記集解 (Collected commentaries on the *Shi ji*) in eighty fascicles.

In this same fashion, we find commentaries on the commentaries, and as these accumulated to a certain extent, the traditional Chinese method in the study of the classics was to put compendia together. This practice would then be repeated later. In the Tang dynasty (618–907), Sima Zhen 司馬貞 (679–732) wrote the *Shi ji suoyin* 史記索隱 (Seeking the obscure in the *Shi ji*) in thirty fascicles, and he was followed by Zhang Shoujie 張守節 (fl. 725–735), who wrote the *Shi ji zhengyi* 史記正義 (The true meaning of the *Shi ji*) in thirty fascicles as well. These last three works (by Pei, Sima, and Zhang), known collectively as the “three commentaries” (*sanzhu* 三注), were initially single-volume works, but later in the Song dynasty (960–1279), when the *Shi ji* was wood-block printed, these three books were separated by content and inserted into the main text. This became the model for the authoritative edition of the *Shi ji*.

Nonetheless, commentaries on the *Shi ji* and critiques of its composition continued unabated, and they accumulated with each passing era. In the fourth year of the Wanli 萬曆 reign (1576) of the Ming dynasty, Ling Zhilong 凌稚隆 compiled these theories in the margins and published it under the title *Shi ji pinglin* 史記評林 (Forest of comments on the *Shi ji*), and it circulated widely in China and abroad. This work was well known in Japan, and several reprintings of it were carried out here.

This is all due to the fact that the *Shi ji pinglin* took shape in the scholarly practice of the Ming dynasty, when critique of literary style based on the influence of the civil service examinations at the time was widespread. When we move to the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), however, textual exegesis flourished, and the scholarship of the Ming largely receded from view. Accordingly, the *Shi ji pinglin* was treated as considerably less valuable and even with contempt. Qing-era scholars also applied to historical works the methods of exegesis that they were using in classical scholarship, and they produced a number of valuable works on the *Shi ji*; the same may be said of Kangaku 漢學 scholars of the Edo period (1600–1868) in Japan. As such, a need was felt once again to amass all of these views, and Dr. Takigawa Kametarō 瀧川龜太郎 (1865–1946) of Japan devoted over twenty years, from 1913 through 1934, to producing the massive work entitled *Shiki kaichū kōshō* 史記會注考證 (*Shi ji* with assembled annotations and evidential examination).

The Unpunctuated Movement

The method of adding commentaries on top of commentaries, repeatedly, and then collecting them, was certainly one method in classical scholarship. This, however, is not everything. If it were absolutely essential in reading *Shi ji* to also read the commentaries, this would be a major undertaking. If one opened to the section entitled “Basic Annals of the Five Emperors” (五帝本紀) in the first fascicle of the text with the three commentaries inserted — printed with characters in normal size, the commentarial text on the first page is crammed in tightly. It is still better if the three characters *Huangdizhe* 黃帝者 (The Yellow Emperor), from the main text of *Shi ji* appear, but in fact it is more common that even these three characters do not appear.

This is even more the case when we come to the *Shiki kaichū kōshō*: Its first page is largely filled up solely by the names of the commentators; the second page is taken up with explanations and textual explications; and over halfway through the third page, just when you think you’ve finally come to those first three characters of the text, *Huangdizhe*, it is filled up with more commentaries. Throughout, the commentarial text is huge, and the actual *Shi ji* text sporadically interspersed. Is this really the best way to proceed?

Needless to say, this practice did not begin with *Shi ji*. The fundamental work known as *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Commentaries and sub-commentaries on the thirteen classics) on the whole consists much more of the texts of commentaries than the original texts themselves. In fact, the practice of classical scholarship was extended to historical scholarship. It certainly seems as such, though this was neither classical nor historical scholarly work but linguistics.

Perhaps, though, if dividing the original text into parts by the commentary is not an especially good idea, maybe leaping over the commentary and reading only the base text would be a better approach. Maybe such an objection could be raised. While logic might dictate precisely this, when actually reading the text, the reader could see the writing and follow the meaning along with the work’s rhythm; thus, reading as one hunted for the text meant that the rhythm of the original was obstructed by commentaries — there was just no way around it.

A movement did arise to omit all the commentaries and read only the main text of *Shi ji*. Just before the completion of *Shi ji pinglin*, an unpunctuated

version of *Shi ji* prepared by Wu Mianxue 吳勉學 of Xin'an 新安 was published. Although I have as yet not seen this work, it is said to have been very scrupulously corrected for errors. As they say, when things reach a limit, they start to change: on the one hand, while there was a move to increasingly expand massive works like *Shi ji pinglin*, by the same token a desire emerged to jettison all the added materials and seriously come back and read the text itself.

The same direction can be seen in Japan with the publication of the Iwafune 磐舟 edition, *Shiki seibun* 史記正文 (*Shi ji*, official text). This book carries a preface dated the fourth year of Kansei 寛政 (1792) and was printed in Murakami 村上 domain in Echigo 越後. The main text carries no added commentary, no punctuation, no Japanese reading marks for a Chinese text, and no added Japanese syllabaries to show inflection — just the simple, unpunctuated Chinese text. Publication was the work of a domainal Confucian scholar named Hattori Motohiro 服部元寛, and according to his preface, he was apprenticed to his father, Hattori Nankaku 服部南郭 (1683–1759). He had been instructed to read the plain text of the classics as they were, which was precisely what he was doing. Nankaku was the leading disciple of Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728), and thus the roots of Nankaku's scholarly style derives from Sorai.

According to Motohiro, Nankaku drew on text from the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo commentary), and as such was a forerunner in teaching his students to brush away the tiny flies to get at the actual meaning. Motohiro became a Confucian official and lectured on *Shi ji* to other Confucian scholars. In particular, he was said to have seen to printing the text.

Once such a trend emerged, texts with the same title, *Shiki seibun*, were published in many places. A *Shiki seibun* with pronunciation of characters added by Taga Zen 多賀漸 appeared in the fifth year of Kansei (1793), and a work titled *Shō Hakkei santei Shiki seibun* 鍾伯敬刪定史記正文 (*Shi ji*, official text, with revisions of Zhong Bojing) was reprinted in the twelfth year of Kansei (1800). The latter work is said to be a reprint, unchanged, by Kuga Yoshihiko 陸可彦, a Confucian scholar of Nagato 長門 domain, of the original work by Zhong Bojing 鍾伯敬 (1574–1624) of the Ming, but a look at the actual text by Zhong reveals that it is not a completely clean copy, as there are comments included here and there. However, Kuga's reprint has cut all of these out and has simple marginal entries with pronunciation and meaning.

Western-Style Punctuation

The most recent plain-text edition of *Shi ji* was published in 1936 with punctuation added by the profound ancient historian Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980). In punctuating the text, he added lines along the left side of characters to indicate proper nouns. Inasmuch as all commentary has been eliminated, there is much space to accommodate on each page, and the first page of the “Basic Annals of the Five Emperors” contains nine pages of *Shiki kaichū kōshō*. Noticeable here is the treatment of the text completely in a Western style. In Western-language works, proper nouns begin with capital letters, but as this doesn’t work for Chinese-character texts, he substitutes a parallel line along the side. Instead of a regular period, he uses a Chinese-style period (。), but otherwise he uses commas and semi-colons just as one would in Western languages. This manner of punctuation was proposed by Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) at the time of the literary revolution in the early years of the Republic, and it has since spread widely.

These punctuated editions of *Shi ji* are very easy to read. While it’s fine to not be distracted by commentaries, if all comments are completely removed, this can be inconvenient, for the object here is an item over 2,000 years removed from us now. The fact that we can read the text as is, to a certain extent, is actually close to miraculous. It is only natural, then, that when it comes to the details, it is unreadable without special commentary. The *Shi ji*, as one of the twenty-four histories in the recently published series from Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 uses the aforementioned punctuated text; the content is divided into sections according to significance, and at the end of the sections the publisher arranged and inserted material from the “three commentaries.” In the main text, numbers are used to elucidate points of comparison in the commentary, in a manner just like indexes in Western works.

Just because academic methods have become Westernized is no reason to look down on them. Modern Western methods of punctuation went through reform after reform over a long period before reaching its present stage. It is not true that this was a characteristic of Western culture since ancient Greece. Writing at that time had neither special symbols nor paragraphs; it was featureless, much like traditional Chinese text without commentaries.

In outlining the changes in the format of printed texts of *Shi ji*, I think that past explanations of how the text was read need no further discussion.

And the best way to read the *Shi ji* from now on is to start from the conclusions finally reached, in a manner no different than in any other field of research.

The *Shi ji* and Japan

As such, the main text of *Shi ji* is arranged and presented for us in a form quite easy to read, and we Japanese need to appreciate the advantage we enjoy that there are numerous Japanese-language translations available. Beginning in the Edo period, woodblock-printed editions with Japanese reading punctuation attached were published in Japan, and these were effectively half-translated into Japanese. There are, of course, debates over whether we should read works in literary Chinese as would a Chinese person with Chinese pronunciation. By the same token, the nature of literary Chinese necessitates that we Japanese read it in Japanese (*kundoku* 訓讀); in this manner, it has spread through all the regions of China with different dialects and as far as Korea, Vietnam, and Japan with their different languages. If it is prose that must be read in Chinese pronunciation, then it is best to write it completely in Chinese graphs. In fact, in the early Meiji period (1868–1912), in order to study English, people would attach Japanese reading punctuation to reading the English-language text in Japanese, and thus there developed a method to read the main text simultaneously, but this failed after a short period of time and was abandoned. English, it turns out, does not lend itself to the use of Japanese reading punctuation.

Be that as it may, when Japanese attempt to read *Shi ji*, there are already a fair number of old editions available, and there are additionally printed editions and Japanese translations. Recently, a considerable quantity of such published editions have come into circulation as well. Thus, it is now extremely easy to acquire a copy of the text. For some inexplicable reason, many people feel an attachment to the work as they turn its pages. This fact is not just because it is a Chinese classic, but it indicates that for Japanese as well it has become an important classic.

This takes us back to our point of departure. Because it's the text of a report, if you can read it, you should understand; there's no need for excess or interference of commentary or introduction — this would seem to fit well with Zhang Xuecheng's theory. I still think we can consider the need for commentary. There was originally no need for commentary; however, as times

shift and circumstances change, it is unavoidable that there will be places in the text that one cannot understand. This situation was eloquently chronicled when all the commentaries were initially removed from punctuated texts, but the editors of the traditional collection of the Twenty-Four Histories (in which *Shi ji* appears) had no choice but to revive the three commentaries.

The rationale is well established that, if you go to an art museum, it's perfectly fine to just look at and appreciate the paintings and sculpture. If, however, you try to learn on your own and reach the level of expertise of experts in the field, it is likely to require a great deal of time. After all, isn't it good to have predecessors? Even if my last words end up denying what my predecessors have said, I can claim that this is proof that they were useful in some way. It would be presumptuous to consider myself a predecessor, but in this case, I have to go that far in order for my meaning to be conveyed. If a reader could in one evening surpass the sixty years of experience I have accumulated, then I trust that it might have been a thorough waste of time.

The birth and death dates of Sima Qian, the author of *Shi ji*, are not known. It is generally thought that he was born in the fifth year of the Zhongyuan 中元 (145 BCE) reign period of Emperor Jing 景帝 (r. 157–141 BCE) of the Han dynasty, that he lived in the era of the following Emperor Wu 武帝 (156–87 BCE, r. 141–87 BCE), that he held the posts of Gentleman of the Palace (*langzhong* 郎中) and *Taishi Ling* 太史令, among others, that he was implicated in the incident involving the surrender to the Xiongnu of General Li Ling 李陵 (d. 74 BCE), his friend, and was castrated; later, he was appointed Director of Palace Writers (*zhongshu ling* 中書令), and he died around the time that Emperor Wu died in the second year of the Houyuan 後元 reign period (87 BCE).

His work, the *Shi ji*, marked the continuation of his father Sima Tan's 司馬談 (165–110 BCE) ambition to compile a history, and Sima Qian worked diligently to completion. It is comprised of twelve fascicles of Basic Annals, ten of Tables, eight of Treatises, thirty of Hereditary Houses, and seventy of Biographies—altogether, 130 fascicles and a total of over 526,500 characters. Ten fascicles are missing. The last fascicle in the Biographies section contains the “Autobiography of the Senior Archivist” (*Taishigong zixu* 太史公自序) and an overall table of contents of the work. Sima Qian's biography appears in fascicle 62 of the *Han shu* 漢書 (History of the Former Han dynasty). Contained within it is his famous lengthy letter addressed to his friend Ren An 任安 (d. 91 BCE).

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A Pioneer of the Standard Histories

The Creation of the Annals-Biographical Form

The Independence of Historical Studies

Sima Qian was the author of *Shi ji*, which is not only the first work of history in China, but also appears first among the twenty-four standard histories. He was born in the second century BCE and lived at the height of the Former Han dynasty. This was some three centuries after Herodotus, considered the pioneer historian in the West, who lived in the fifth century BCE. To put this more clearly, compared to the West, Chinese culture emerged considerably later. The development of historical studies is one powerful index to determine the progress of culture.

The *Shi ji* is the history of an ethnic group in which the Chinese constitute the core, not a history of the world. However, the *Shi ji*'s narrative extends far and wide—limited by what was known at the time in China—to Outer Mongolia in the north, the Mediterranean in the west, India in the south, and to a mountain of immortals in the sea to the east. All of these peoples, though, were qualitatively different from China, and the author did not begin writing from an overall position that these peoples existed with their own traditions parallel to those of China. When on occasion they came into contact with China, Sima Qian showed an interest merely in this contact. He had no concern whatsoever to investigate their past or where they were headed in the future.

Sima Qian had no philosophy as we would now understand that term. He merely had a sense of values with which he wrote his *Shi ji*. He did not believe