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The Frustration of the Second Confucius

I transmit and do not create.

—*Analects*, 7.1.

I grieve that my heart has that which it has not completely expressed, and that I might die and my writing not be known to later ages.

—Sima Qian.

Sima Qian not only is ancient China's greatest historian, he also is "the first author of a truly autobiographical self-testimony in China."¹ In fact, when the historian Ban Gu wrote a biography of Sima Qian and included it in his *History of the Han*, he could do little more than quote Sima Qian's own writings.² Thus, what we know of Sima Qian derives almost exclusively from his own hand; he creates himself, much as he creates China's past, through his written word. Moreover, the text that is his life and the text that is his history resonate with one another, contain parallel themes, and reflect similar tensions. My attempt to demonstrate this thesis begins with the text that is Sima Qian's life.

Sima Qian speaks extensively of himself in two documents, and these form almost the entire text of Ban Gu's biography: the "Self-Narration of the Gentleman Grand Astrologer" ("Tai shi gong zixu"—hereafter, "Self-Narration"), which is the final chapter of *Records of the Historian*; and "Letter in Response to Ren An" ("Bao Ren An shu"). The first of these is a formal document in which Sima Qian establishes his credentials as a historian, explains why he wrote his monumental history, and summarizes his text's overall structure. The second document is a long letter, probably written in

93 B.C.E. to Ren An, a friend who was in prison under a death sentence and was subsequently cut in two at the waist.³ This letter focuses almost entirely upon one critical event in Sima Qian's life and is much more personal and emotional than the "Self-Narration." From these two documents, documents quiet different from one another both in purpose and in form, emerges a picture of a profound tension within Sima Qian between a "classical" demand to contain and transmit tradition and a need to vent a prodigious creative energy nurtured by deep personal frustration. This tension can be further explained by a remarkable chapter of *Records of the Historian*, "The Traditions of Bo Yi" (chapter 61), a chapter considered in detail below.

Two figures dominate Sima Qian's "Self-Narration": his father, Sima Tan (d. 110 B.C.E.), and Confucius. Sima Qian presents both as conservative voices, voices of ritual (*li*) and duty (*yi*) that constrain Sima Qian and require him to construct the broad tradition of the past according to a preestablished blueprint. Yet Sima Tan and Confucius, like so many other figures from China's past, are largely creations of Sima Qian's own writing brush and are inextricably woven in the "Self-Narration" into one overwhelming authority figure. As we shall see, Sima Tan invokes the prestige of Confucius, and Confucius, through the principle of filial piety (*xiao*), empowers Sima Tan.

Filial piety, which plays a central role in the "Self-Narration," had become the primary Confucian virtue by Sima Qian's time.⁴ During the first century of the Western Han dynasty, the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiao jing*), a text proclaiming filial piety "the root of all virtue," had gained wide circulation, and each Han emperor also had been granted the character *xiao* as a part of his posthumous name. As a result of this promotion of filial piety, Confucius was identified with all fathers, indeed all authority figures. Sima Qian's own acute sense of filial piety is reflected in an interesting passage in *Records of the Historian*, where duty to the father is placed above duty to the state. Although the speaker in the story under question is the viscount of the state of Wei, the quotation has no antecedent in earlier literature, and the distinguished Japanese scholar Takikawa Kametarō argues that Sima Qian is "merely speaking out and recommending his own thoughts":

The viscount of Wei said, "A father and a son have [a relationship of] flesh and bone, while a minister and a lord are attached by dutifulness. Therefore, if a father is in error, and a son remonstrates

three times but is not heard, then the son complies but cries out for him. If a minister remonstrates three times but is not heard, then dutifulness allows him to depart.⁵

Sima Tan, to whom Sima Qian was attached by a filial relationship he believed transcended even dutifulness to the emperor, served in the Han bureaucracy as Prefect Grand Astrologer (*tai shi ling*), an official position concerned largely with drawing up the calendar and with identifying auspicious and inauspicious days for imperial activities. The Prefect Grand Astrologer seems also to have had the responsibility of keeping records of the correlation between celestial and terrestrial phenomena, a task that made him a recorder of important human events.⁶

Despite the relatively low salary of Sima Tan's official position, his tasks required versatility and a high degree of technical training. At the beginning of his "Self-Narration," Sima Qian writes with obvious pride of his father's educational background and intellect. First, he lists Sima Tan's academic mentors, a highly impressive list, and then he faithfully reproduces his father's lengthy essay entitled "The Essential Meaning of the Six Schools" ("Liu jia yaozhi"). In introducing the essay, Sima Qian notes that his father "served as an official during the *Jian yuan* and *Yuan feng* reign periods (140–110 B.C.E.)." Sima Qian goes on to explain that his father "was distressed that scholars did not elucidate their ideas and that teachers were perverse" and that this is why he wrote "The Essential Meaning of the Six Schools."⁷

Assuredly Sima Tan, as his son's explanation implies, was out of step with the philosophical trends dominating the court of Emperor Wu. Those trends, and Sima Tan's reaction to them, can best be understood against the backdrop of the intellectual developments of the century before Sima Tan's birth. As noted briefly in the introduction, the philosophical variety of the late Zhou, which modern Western scholars are inclined to admire, was usually regarded by ancient Chinese as an unhappy extension of the political disunity of that time. One early Chinese thinker had exclaimed in frustration, "How sad!—the hundred schools going on and on instead of turning back, fated never to join again."⁸ The rhetoric of this expression of frustration leans upon a belief, widespread in the late Zhou, Qin, and early Han, that all learning in the halcyon days of the early Zhou was "official learning" and hence completely unified.⁹

The political and intellectual conflict of the last centuries of the

Zhou, which contrasts so starkly with the legendary unity of an earlier and "happier" era, stimulated a search for new order both in the world of government and in the world of thought. This search, I believe, produced two groups: those who sought unity in intellectual conquest, usually in conjunction with political conquest; and those who sought unity in philosophical synthesis. The line between these two groups, of course, is not always clear. Certainly advocates of conquest were touched themselves by the spirit of synthesis, and advocates of synthesis were not entirely free of a more aggressive side.¹⁰

Two late Zhou treatises, both stylistic forerunners to Sima Tan's evaluation of the "Six Schools," allow us to see the distinction between advocates of conquest and advocates of synthesis. The first of these treatises is found in the writings of the great Confucian master Xunzi (?340–?245 B.C.E.) and is entitled "Against the Twelve Masters" ("Fei shi er zi").¹¹ Xunzi launches strenuous attacks in his treatise on twelve late Zhou masters, who represent various intellectual positions. His criticisms are directed both at teachings and at personalities. Indeed, the only compliment Xunzi can pay his philosophical opponents is to admit, somewhat grudgingly, that "what they support seems reasonable," at least "sufficiently so as to deceive and mislead the ignorant multitude."¹² In his eyes, none of these teachers, nor their teachings, could contribute to the unified kingdom that Xunzi wanted—his own brand of Confucianism was the only hope for the future. Although Xunzi's famous students, the Legalists Li Si and Hanfeizi (d. 233 B.C.E.), may have deviated from the Confucianism of their master, they do resemble him in advocating an aggressive unification based primarily upon a single philosophy.

The second treatise, also an evaluation of other philosophers, is found in one of the later chapters of *Zhuangzi*.¹³ Unlike Xunzi, who could find no value outside of the Confucian tradition, the author of this treatise discovers genuine merit in all of the "Hundred Schools" and believes that the Taoism of Laozi is sufficiently broad to allow a collection of those precious fragments of truth that had been so widely scattered throughout the philosophical world. Entire works written in the late Zhou and early Han dynasties strove for precisely the type of eclecticism reflected in the *Zhuangzi* treatise. These works gathered teachings and principles from a variety of schools and brought them together into a broad synthesis that has often been labelled "Taoist." One of the most noteworthy of these texts, *The Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü* (*Lü shi chun qiu*), can

be seen as the Qin Minister Lü Buwei's (d. 235 B.C.E.) attempt to combat the movement toward belligerent narrowness dominating the court of Qin and represented by such figures as Li Si and Hanfeizi.¹⁴ The goal of Lü Buwei's encyclopedic text was, in the words of Sima Qian, "to complete the affairs of heaven and earth, of the ten thousand things, and of both antiquity and modernity."¹⁵ *Huainanzi*, a later work somewhat reminiscent in its eclecticism of *The Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü*, is the outstanding example of intellectual synthesis in the first century of the Han dynasty. In fact, *Huainanzi* perhaps represents a last gasp of Taoist eclecticism before such doctrines, prominent during the reigns of the Han emperors Wen (r. 180–157 B.C.E.) and Jing (r. 157–141 B.C.E.), were supplanted at court by Emperor Wu's sponsorship of Confucianism.¹⁶

Sima Tan's treatise fits very much into the spirit of synthesis typified by the second of these groups, and it comes, like *Huainanzi*, at a time when that other spirit, the spirit of philosophical conquest advanced by such a formidable figure as Dong Zhongshu (?179–?104 B.C.E.), was ascendant at court. It is impossible to date Sima Tan's treatise precisely, but it was most likely written in the thirty-year period between Dong Zhongshu's memorial to Emperor Wu in 140 B.C.E. (?), advocating that "all not within . . . the arts of Confucius . . . be cut short," and Tan's death in 110 B.C.E. If this is so, Sima Tan and Dong Zhongshu may indeed have been archrivals, as Zhang Dake and other modern scholars have suggested.¹⁷

Sima Tan, like his contemporary Liu An (179–122 B.C.E.), gathers his eclecticism under the philosophical rubric of Taoism. In fact, Taoism is the only one of the six schools discussed in Sima Tan's essay to receive an entirely positive evaluation: "Taoism . . . changes with the times, responds to the transformations of things . . . is economical in doctrine and easy to carry out. Its duties are few but its merits many."¹⁸ Sima Tan's criticisms of the other five schools largely center either upon their troublesome proliferation of rules and prohibitions (Confucianism and the Yin-yang School) or upon their excessive and unreasonable harshness (Mohism and Legalism).

Such Taoist sympathies plainly belong to the early decades of the Han dynasty when Taoism had become the basis of an imperial policy of "non-action." Whether or not the reigns of the Han emperors Wen and Jing, during which Sima Tan must have grown up and matured as a scholar, were as quiescent as sometimes portrayed is a subject of some dispute.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it is certain that these

decades were a period of consolidation in which Taoism was often invoked to justify essentially laissez-fair policies. With Emperor Wu's accession in 141 B.C.E. and the death in 135 B.C.E. of Empress Dou, an ardent advocate of Taoism, this all changed. Emperor Wu was an activist who wanted to expand both the boundaries of the empire and the government's economic powers. He was also profoundly influenced by the recommendations of the Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu, who called for a thorough reorganization of intellectual life around the traditional "Six Arts."²⁰

One might conclude from reading Sima Tan's "Treatise" that he was a tolerant Taoist thinker completely disaffected with the Confucian trends of his time. Such a reading is complicated somewhat by Sima Qian's memory of his father's deathbed admonition. In the most dramatic section of Sima Qian's "Self-Narration," Sima Tan claims that his family's "ancestors were Grand Astrologers for the house of Zhou." After expressing concern that his family has declined, Sima Tan continues declaiming to his son in the most emotional terms: "Will it end with me? . . . When I die, you must become Grand Astrologer. When you are Grand Astrologer, do not forget what I have desired to evaluate and to write!"

Next, Sima Tan quotes *Classic of Filial Piety* to reinforce the plea that his son must continue the family tradition and bring glory to both himself and his ancestors: "Filial piety begins in serving parents, matures in serving the ruler, and ends in establishing oneself. To raise one's name in later generations and thereby glorify one's parents, this is the greatest expression of filial piety."²¹

A passage like this, from a text of such extraordinary status and authority, could hardly fail to make a powerful impression on any devoted son. Moreover, Sima Tan immediately follows his quotation from *Classic of Filial Piety* with a summary of the great labors of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius, who heroically preserved and illuminated the past. He himself would continue the work of those earlier sages, but his own time has run out, and so the heavy task must be given to his son:

From the capture of the unicorn on down has been more than four-hundred years . . . Today Han has arisen and the whole empire is united. But as to enlightened lords, worthy rulers, loyal officials, and gentlemen who died for duty, I have been Grand Astrologer and have not evaluated and recorded them. The loss of the empire's historical documents is what I deeply fear. I hope you will think of this!²²

Sima Tan's deathbed reference to the time that has passed since the capture of the unicorn is clarified somewhat by another statement that Sima Qian attributes to his father and includes elsewhere in his "Self-Narration:"

My father used to say: "From the death of the Duke of Zhou, five hundred years passed, and there was Confucius. After the death of Confucius down to the present time, there have been five hundred years. If one could only link up with the enlightened generations and put in order *Changes (Yi)*, continue *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and take as basis *Poetry, Historical Documents, Ritual (Li)* and *Music (Yue)*!"²³

Sima Tan, as quoted by his son, alludes here to Mencius' theory, picked up in the early Han by Jia Yi (201–169 B.C.E.), that a sage arises every 500 years.²⁴ His arithmetic, surprisingly inaccurate for a Prefect Grand Astrologer who has as one of his duties the calculation of the calendar, leads to the conclusion that another sage is due. The presence of the previous sage, Confucius, was signalled by the capture of a unicorn, an event reported quite soberly for the year 481 B.C.E. in the very last entry of *Spring and Autumn Annals*.²⁵ If another sage is due, then so is another unicorn; and the mythical beast, as we shall see, will indeed wander onto the pages of history once again!

The words of Sima Tan, dying in frustration near Luoyang, hardly remind us of the author of "The Essential Meaning of the Six Schools." The Taoist syncretic, Sima Tan, who advocates in his essay a path that is neither harsh nor troublesome, suddenly appears, in Sima Qian's account of his final words, filled with anxiety about the preservation of tradition, a tradition linked with the Duke of Zhou and Confucius. Indeed, Sima Tan presents Confucius as the model his son must follow in order to prevent the past from slipping into darkness forever. Sima Qian, in the words of a father who elsewhere praises Taoist "non-action," must "not forget," he must "think of this." Whatever moderation he may have advocated in his "Essay," Sima Tan conveys to his son an ostensibly un-Taoist and very "troublesome" anxiety in his final paternal injunction.

Sima Qian responds to this admonition as we might expect from a filial son: "I, Qian, bowed my head and, with flowing tears, said, 'I the small child, am not clever, but I request in all cases to elucidate the old accounts that you, father, have put in order. I would not dare to be deficient!'"²⁶ Sima Qian's response to his

father's speech on the five-hundred-year succession of sages is similar: "How could I, the small child, dare yield this task to others!"²⁷

How do we explain the apparent discrepancy between Sima Tan, the Taoist author of "The Essential Meaning of the Six Schools," and Sima Qian, the stern voice of Confucian responsibility speaking to his son in the "Self-Narration?" Part of the explanation may be sought in a critical feature of Sima Qian's style as a compiler of the past. *Records of the Historian*, as subsequent chapters of this study will attempt to demonstrate in some detail, is a vast collection of diverse texts and conflicting voices. Sima Qian sometimes adapts older texts, bringing them into general compliance with his own language and narrative style, while other texts are edited in a somewhat cursory fashion, and still others are quoted verbatim. Although there is no second source of Sima Tan's treatise on the Six Schools, I believe that it belongs to the last of these categories—it is a direct and faithful reproduction of Sima Tan's actual essay. Elsewhere, Sima Qian shows no inclination to write this type of extended philosophical piece, and the voice speaking in the treatise, both in its pro-Taoist content, and its somewhat dispassionate, impersonal style, does not resemble that of Sima Qian. So far as I know, no one has suggested that this piece is anything other than what it purports to be—an authentic treatise by Sima Tan, accurately reproduced by his son.

Sima Tan's deathbed admonitions are quite another matter; these closely resemble the dramatic speeches delivered at crucial moments throughout the pages of *Records of the Historian*. Sima Qian, we know, wrote his "Self-Narration" as a postface to *Records of the Historian* after he had virtually completed his vast study. Thus, it was written approximately twenty years following his father's death. Consequently, Sima Qian's memory of that event is inevitably molded by his own intervening experience, and that experience demands that he provide the strongest conceivable justification for being alive and speaking out at all. The suggestion that Sima Qian's record of his father's final words might be distorted requires us to consider the crucial event standing between the death of Sima Qian's father and his own record of that death. That event was, of course, his tragic involvement in the Li Ling affair and his subsequent imprisonment and castration. The story of this episode in Han history has been told in detail elsewhere and need only be summarized here.²⁸

In 99 B.C.E., Li Ling, a young and somewhat impetuous general, led a small army of five-thousand infantry against the Xiongnu, a

non-Chinese people who had posed a problem to the Han leaders for much of the previous century. Although Li Ling's small army fought with great courage and inflicted heavy casualties upon the enemy, it was eventually defeated, and Li Ling was captured alive. When news of these events reached court, an explosion of criticism was directed at the young general. Only Sima Qian defended Li Ling before the emperor, but his defense was "misunderstood," and he was turned over to the court, where he was sentenced to death for "defaming the emperor." The punishment could have been commuted by paying a sum of money, but his family's wealth was insufficient, and no friends nor relatives came forth to help or "speak a single word" on his behalf. Eventually, perhaps as a result of his own plea, the punishment was reduced to castration, which Sima Qian suffered in the notorious "Silkworm Hall."²⁹

The terrible trauma of Silkworm Hall and of his subsequent life as a eunuch is powerfully described in the second document in which Sima Qian discusses his own experience, the famous "Letter in Response to Ren An." This letter will be explored in greater detail below; it suffices here to note that as Sima Qian sat to compose a letter to his condemned friend Ren An, the specter of his father, now posthumously dishonored by his son's castration, rose before him:

Because of the words of my mouth, I have encountered this calamity, am deeply ridiculed in my native village, and have thereby dishonored my father. With what face can I again ascend the grave mound of my parents? Although a hundred generations pile up, my disgrace will only multiply!³⁰

Mutilated, "a remnant of saw and blade," as he calls himself, Sima Qian has violated one of the most critical demands of filial piety—to return the body received from one's parents to the grave whole.³¹ In addition, his reputation, not yet properly established, cannot bring the honor his father demanded as he lay dying. Instead, Sima Qian claims that he is ridiculed, just like the other eunuchs he catalogues in his letter.³² Faced by such overwhelming shame and disgrace, Sima Qian must present a compelling justification for rejecting suicide and continuing to live. Just such a justification is found in the dying voice of his father commanding him to complete the record, to summarize the tradition, and to become another Confucius. The stain on his father's and his own name cannot be removed by the noble path of suicide but only by remaining alive and piously heeding a father's call to duty.

To digress briefly into a somewhat more speculative interpretative arena, it seems to me that one can identify in Sima Qian's description of his castration and of his subsequent memory of his father's words, a curious "family romance." Sima Tan, as the voice recreated in his son's own mind, becomes the agent of castration, keeping his son alive as a pitiful "remnant of saw and blade." That voice, as I have noted elsewhere, would trim and shape his son's creative powers around the authoritative presence of Confucius. But Sima Qian, as we shall see, will confront the anxiety of his father's invocation of the Master by producing a history so comprehensive and complete as to defy simple reduction into any Confucian categories, as well as radically to overstep even his father's own modest treatise as an exercise in broad and creative synthesis.

I am not necessarily claiming that Sima Tan's words, heard through a filter of twenty years and an extremely traumatic event, are entirely his son's fiction. What I am arguing is that Sima Qian remembers his own past and reinterprets that past, like all human beings, through a haze of subsequent events, and that in this case memory inevitably reflects the pain and internal conflict of those terrible events. Thus, the voice of Sima Qian's father, dying near Luoyang, unlike the voice of his philosophical treatise, is at least partially Sima Qian's own voice. The stern, demanding Sima Tan may be at least partly a creation Sima Qian can utilize to justify living on in shame and humiliation.

Still another reason for the apparent disharmony between the Sima Tan of the treatise and the Sima Tan who speaks to his son from his deathbed leads us toward Confucius, the second dominating figure of the "Self-Narration." Sima Qian, we must remember, was the child of an age quite different from that in which his father had grown up. To him, Confucius is clearly the ultimate authority, and he quotes the Sage repeatedly in *Records of the Historian*. Li Changzhi may be quite correct in labelling Sima Qian "the second most loyal follower of Confucius, the first being Mencius."³³ But Sima Qian must strive to be more than just a loyal follower, for his father has enjoined him to become a second Confucius. Such a lofty, perhaps even vain ambition is not without dangers. First, it can hardly be considered modest, in an age when Confucius is proclaimed as "the ultimate Sage" (*zhi sheng*), to announce oneself as his successor. Second, Confucius' life and the texts that he produced were regarded in the Han as necessary to correct the terrible political chaos of his time. Thus, for Sima Qian to present himself as "a second Confucius" is to imply a correspondence between his

own time and the time of the Sage, a correspondence that the arrogant Emperor Wu would hardly find pleasing. Sima Qian plainly anticipates and attempts to allay these vexing issues. Making use of a rhetorical strategy common in ancient Chinese prose, Sima Qian creates an interlocutor, in this case "the high official Hu Sui," who asks "questions" and thereby provides Sima Qian with an opportunity to defuse potential objections. Hu Sui, sensing the parallel Sima Qian is drawing between himself and Confucius, asks:

In the time of Confucius, there was no enlightened ruler above, and he was unable to obtain employment below. Therefore, he wrote *Spring and Autumn Annals*, handing down theoretical words to determine ritual and dutifulness and to constitute the law of a true king. Now, you, sir, encounter an enlightened Son of Heaven above and manage to hold office below. Since all business is complete and everything is ordered to its advantage, what do you, sir, wish to illustrate with your writings?³⁴

In a rather tangled response to this question, Sima Qian asserts that he is only trying to proclaim fully the virtue of Emperor Wu, the "enlightened sage" who is on the throne. The current age, he claims, is not at all the same as the chaotic age of Confucius.³⁵ Indeed, Sima Qian argues that his very purpose is to prevent the loss of a proper record of all those worthy and meritorious men who have contributed to his own age of peace. Far from detracting from his age, he would only immortalize its true glory! Then Sima Qian concludes his argument with the following fascinating statement, "What I am referring to is transmitting ancient matters and arranging traditions passed down through the ages. This is not what can be called 'creating.' For you, lord, to compare it to *Spring and Autumn Annals* is mistaken indeed!"³⁶

In this final passage, Sima Qian goes beyond rejecting a likeness between his own age and that of Confucius and seems even to deny that his historical work is in any way equivalent to the Sage's work, for he, unlike Confucius, is only a transmitter and not a creator at all! However, Sima Qian, great scholar that he is, knows full well that Confucius himself said, "I transmit and do not create."³⁷ By stating that he only transmits and does not create, Sima Qian appears humbly to reject the comparison with Confucius, but he is in reality only affirming it.

One need not look far for additional evidence of Sima Qian's attempt to present himself as the next link in the 500-year "sage-

cycle," the true inheritor of the tradition of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius. As noted previously, a unicorn was supposedly captured in 481 B.C.E. The report of this mysterious event concludes *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the paradigmatic history attributed to Confucius. The *Gongyang Commentary* (*Gongyang zhuan*), one of three ancient texts that have been transmitted as authoritative commentaries to *Spring and Autumn Annals*, explains that "If there is a true king, then [the unicorn] comes."³⁸ Assuredly a true king was not in a position of political power during the chaotic years in which Confucius lived. That true king, according to an early Han interpretation, was the "uncrowned king"—Confucius himself. Sima Qian reports that in 122 B.C.E. another unicorn was captured, and he further characterizes his own history as covering the period from the mythical Taotang "on down to the unicorn."³⁹ This event could, of course, signal Heaven's approval of the reign of Emperor Wu, or it could signal the appearance of another uncrowned king who, like Confucius before him, would present to posterity a definitive summary of tradition.

Furthermore, at the end of *Gongyang Commentary*, just after a comment on the significance of the unicorn that appeared in Confucius' age, this influential exegesis of *Spring and Autumn Annals* concludes with the words of Confucius himself: "I have put in order the principles of *Spring and Autumn Annals* and thereby await a later sage." By means of these final words, *Gongyang Commentary* indicates that another sage will come who will fully understand the real meaning of Confucius' subtle history. Sima Qian ends his *Records of the Historian* with a similar note, which overtly unites his own text to the earlier *Spring and Autumn Annals*: "I have stored one copy [of *Records of the Historian*] in a famous mountain and a second at the capital. I await a sage, a true gentleman, of later generations."⁴⁰

A much fuller explanation of the relationship between Confucius, the Confucian tradition, and Sima Qian will be found in chapters two and three below. It is important here only to realize that Sima Tan's charge to his son "to be another Confucius," and the specter of the uncrowned king summoned through those words, exercised a restraint upon our historian, defined a particular task, and empowered him with the authority of the past. Sima Tan and Confucius speak to Sima Qian as voices of duty and responsibility. Moreover, the Confucian restraint and moderation those voices urge is not just ideological, it is also verbal; for the Ultimate Sage, as a historian, is also noted for his remarkable verbal economy. When he

composed his masterwork, *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Sima Qian claims that Confucius "made the words economical but the meaning broad."⁴¹

Despite this compelling Confucian model of restraint, the power of Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian* derives neither from containment of emotion nor from economy of words. The powerful forces of ritual duty and tradition represented by Sima Tan and Confucius are balanced and frequently overwhelmed by Sima Qian's compulsion to expand his work and digest all that has gone before him. As the great Han historian's temporal and textual horizons broadened to include all of the past and its manifold texts, the possibility of conflict and dilemma increased. Furthermore, the very power of Sima Qian's text, as I hope to show below, derives from such conflict and not from terseness or ritual order.

In addition to the problem of scope mentioned above, Sima Qian's own theory of literary creativity was certain to subvert the model of restraint and economy presented by *Spring and Autumn Annals*. According to Sima Qian, literary power springs from a prodigious, frustrated energy that makes constraint and control all but impossible. In one of his most important passages, and the only extended passage he repeats virtually verbatim in both the "Self-Narration" and the "Letter," Sima Qian explains the origin of creative energy in the following words:

In former times the Count of the West was arrested at Qiangli and developed *Changes of Zhou* (*Zhou yi*). Confucius was in distress in the region of Chen and Cai and created *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Qu Yuan was banished and wrote "Encountering Sorrow" ("Li sao"). Zuo Qiuming lost his sight, and then there was *Discourses of the States* (*Guo yu*). Master Sun had his legs amputated at the knees and elucidated *Military Tactics* (*Bing fa*). Buwei was removed to Shu and generations have passed down his "Overviews of Lü" ("Lü lan"). Hanfei was imprisoned in Qin and we have "The Difficulties of Persuasion" ("Shuo nan") and "The Frustrations of Standing Alone" ("Ku fen"). The three hundred pieces of *Poetry* were, for the most part, written as a result of worthies and sages expressing frustration. In all these cases, men had ideas that were stifled. They could not manage to communicate their doctrines [in their generation]. Therefore, they narrated past events and thought of people to come.⁴²

Great literary works, according to this theory, result from extreme human conditions such as rejection, imprisonment, frustra-

tion, and the pain of mutilation and death. Literature, then, is displaced energy—unable to express ideas in the immediate political world, which should be the concern of all good Confucians, the writer withdraws, ponders “past events” and speaks his heart to an audience yet unborn. In the model Sima Qian elaborates above, the writer dies to his own generation to be reborn through the text he creates in another, juster age. One might even say that the frustrated scholar becomes a “textual” shaman who speaks for the dead in a later generation. And as the scholar-historian bestows immortality on others, he garners the same precious gift for himself.

The perspective reflected in Sima Qian’s theory of literary production spawns in China a whole body of literature containing what Hellmut Wilhelm has called “the theme of the scholar’s frustration.”⁴³ In such literary works the author typically bemoans the fact that he is born out of his time and therefore must live unappreciated. He lays his case for fame and understanding before an audience that is yet to come—his readership in future generations. It is correct, I think, to regard *Records of the Historian* as one of the great fountainheads of this important Chinese literary theme. One can, of course, point to earlier figures, Confucius and the poet Qu Yuan (?343–?277 B.C.E.) among them, whose lives exemplify the “scholar’s frustration,” but we know of these figures and become aware of their unhappy obstruction precisely because of the way they are portrayed in *Records of the Historian*. In other words, these paradigmatic representatives of frustration are in large measure Sima Qian’s creations!

It is interesting to note, in this connection, that Sima Qian has left one significant piece of literature other than his massive *Records of the Historian* and his “Letter in Response to Ren An,” and that also exemplifies the theme of frustration. A rhapsody (*fu*) entitled “A Lament for Unemployed Gentlemen” (“Bei shi bu yu”), it speaks of unappreciated talent:

In truth his endowment is adequate, but his time is out of joint.
Endlessly he toils up to the very verge of death.
Though possessed of [pleasing] form, he goes unnoticed,
While capable, he cannot demonstrate his ability.⁴⁴

The deep frustration described in this rhapsody must issue forth—it is the wellspring of a great literary work. Elsewhere, Sima Qian uses the term *fa fen* 發憤 to describe an extreme outpouring of such repressed emotion. Most of the poems of the highly esteemed

Classic of Poetry, Sima Qian claims, are the results of *fa fen*, which I have translated in the passage cited earlier as "expressing frustration."⁴⁵ Sima Qian also uses this same term to describe the extreme release of emotion that led to his father's death. He writes that when the Emperor Wu first performed the Feng sacrifice in 110 B.C.E. to proclaim formally to Heaven the succession of the Han, the Duke Grand Astrologer, Sima Qian's father, was left behind in Zhounan and was unable to attend. Saddened at his exclusion from the sacred ceremony, Sima Tan "expressed frustration" (*fa fen*) and drew near to death."⁴⁶ This term, which appears elsewhere in Sima Qian to describe a release of energy in some good cause, obviously cannot be covered adequately by a single English word and needs further explanation.⁴⁷

Fa fen is a verb-object compound. The verbal element, *fa*, means simply "to release, to shoot forth (as an arrow), to express." The object, *fen*, is etymologically a part of a whole family of words associated with being "filled up," usually, but not always, with "vexation" (*fan* 煩), "resentment" (*men* 悶), or "anger" (*fen* 忿).⁴⁸ Elsewhere, Sima Qian uses the word *yuan* 怨, which may be a more distant member of the same word family, to express the emotion that so often leads to literary production and/or death. The critical point is that the term connotes a damming and subsequent release of energy. This intense release, an eruption of pent-up frustration, quite naturally inclines towards excess and cannot be easily contained within discrete ritual categories.

Sima Qian's theory of literary production, as described above and encapsulated in the term *fa fen*, evokes one of the fundamental contradictions of his life. Confucius, the representative of restraint and economy, stands before him as the model cited in the recollected words of his father, and such a model, it would seem, should moderate both Sima Qian's language and his emotion. But his frustration, validated and enhanced by mutilation that left him "a remnant of saw and blade," fights against containment. Indeed, his own historical work, in direct opposition to the subtle understatement of Confucius' *Spring and Autumn Annals* becomes a virtual catalogue of excess.

I do not mean to imply here that Confucius was without his own frustrations. Indeed, his life, at least as Sima Qian presents it, is a study in frustration (see chapter 2). But Confucius' response to political failure, for the most part, is one of restraint. The Sage never falls into the extremes of frenzy and self-destruction typical of so many other characters portrayed in *Records of the Historian*. Chief

among this latter character type, and perhaps Sima Qian's strongest contrast to the restraint and caution of Confucius, is Qu Yuan, sometimes called "the father of Chinese poetry." As is so often the case with figures from China's ancient past, Qu Yuan is primarily Sima Qian's creation, and the historian presents the story in a way that directly links Qu Yuan's poetry to political frustration. In the narrative of Qu Yuan's life, more clearly than anywhere else, Sima Qian ties together the theme of annihilation in one's own time with the theme of literary production, which guarantees a reputation in some later age.

The story is a famous one that has become firmly embedded in the consciousness of both the educated elite and the commoner as well. Qu Yuan warns the king of his native state of Chu against any alliance with Qin, the ominous power developing in the northwest. For his anti-Qin advice, he is traduced by officials, estranged from the king, and finally exiled. Sima Qian describes Qu Yuan's tragic demise in the most extreme terms.

Qu Yuan was a man of undeviating duty who devoted all his loyalty and all his knowledge to the service of his prince; yet he was traduced by false witness. Well might he be called "afflicted." He was faithful, yet was disbelieved; loyal and yet calumniated. Is it any wonder that he was resentful (*yuan*)? It was the sense of wrong that inspired Qu Yuan's composition of "Encountering Sorrow." . . . [After further estrangement and banishment] Qu Yuan came to the banks of the river. With his hair hanging down in disarray, he wandered by the water's edge, singing as he went. . . . Then he composed the poem "Embracing the Sand." . . . Then, clasping a stone to his bosom, he threw himself into the Milo River and perished.⁴⁹

While the admonition of his father may turn Sima Qian towards Confucius, his own experience with "calumny" and "estrangement" assuredly summons the memory of Qu Yuan.⁵⁰ Sima Qian's description of his personal experience, as written in his impassioned "Letter in Response to Ren An," is no less emotional nor more restrained than his tale of Qu Yuan, the "afflicted" poet of "disarray" and suicide. Indeed, the prose of Sima Qian's famous letter is so filled with frustration, pathos, and self-denigration that it is almost unbearable to read.

Why Sima Qian chose to write such a piece to a man who was himself condemned to death is a difficult question. Chavannes thinks that the ultimate intent of the letter to Ren An is to convince

his friend to commit suicide and avoid the humiliation of imprisonment and execution.⁵¹ This is a more charitable interpretation of Sima Qian's intentions than I can provide. Many scholars argue that Ren An had asked his friend in a letter to intervene with the emperor on his behalf and that this request motivated Sima Qian's response. However, a careful reading of the letter leads to a somewhat different conclusion. Ren An, at an earlier date, and in somewhat happier times, may have written a high-minded letter admonishing Sima Qian "to recommend and advance qualified persons." Sima Qian did not respond for a rather long period of time and in the interval Ren An fell under a shadow himself. Thus, Sima Qian saw his letter as a last chance to communicate with Ren An. I believe, contrary to Chavannes, that Sima Qian is not trying to convince Ren An of any particular course of action. Instead, he uses the fact that he is speaking to someone who will soon be dead himself as an opportunity to express his own terrible frustration. Ren An's rather pedantic advice is immediately brushed aside by Sima Qian's observation that he himself is only a pathetic eunuch and quite powerless to recommend anyone for advancement; certainly he cannot assist Ren An in his hour of extreme need. After this brief justification for inaction, Sima Qian shifts the focus of the letter from Ren An's predicament to his own unhappy experience. Perhaps the letter, which eventually found its way into the *History of the Han* was never intended simply as a private communication but was written as a final testament to posterity in which Sima Qian allowed himself to be much more direct and emotional than was appropriate in a more formal document like his "Self-Narration," which, after all, constituted the concluding section of his vast history of China.

Whatever Sima Qian's intentions in writing to Ren An, the topic of blocked-up energy, so central to his theory of literary production, appears repeatedly in his letter. He would try to help Ren An, but "When I move I meet with censure." Powerless in the face of the government, Sima Qian claims that he is "despondent and has no one with whom I can speak." The last sentence, incidently, is a quotation from Qu Yuan, indicating how strongly he identifies with the great poet.⁵² Sima Qian goes on in his letter to say that there is no disgrace "greater than castration." A punishment of this type, in his opinion, permanently prevents him from having any immediate political impact, keeps him blocked up: "Although the present court lacks [men of talent], how could it allow a remnant of saw and blade to recommend the talented and heroic?" Sima Qian describes himself as "a mutilated slave who sweeps paths," one who dwells

amidst "trash"—and here again the theme of blocked language appears—"Alas, alas, can one like me still speak?"⁵³

As Sima Qian narrates the details of the Li Ling episode, which led to his imprisonment and punishment, he turns to the subject of suicide and tries to explain why he did not choose this "noble" alternative. The term he uses for suicide is the somewhat unusual *yin jue* 引決, which means something like "to draw forth and decide," with the two syllables of the compound literally meaning "to draw open" and "to open up a channel."⁵⁴

As a literal reading of the term *yin jue* indicates, suicide is one means to alleviate intense pressure, one way to open a channel whereby frustration is finally released. Suicide appears frequently in the pages of *Records of the Historian*, and the characters who are led to "open up" this particular channel inspire some of Sima Qian's most powerful narratives. There is the marvelous example of Xiang Yu, who actually has been called in later times the "Frustrated King" (*fen wang*). Surrounded and facing certain defeat, and insisting to the end that it is no fault of his own but heaven that has defeated him, Xiang Yu sees a former associate in the opposing army and calls out, "I hear that Han has offered for my head a thousand pieces of gold and a fief of ten thousand households. I will do you a favor." He then draws a sword and slits his own throat.⁵⁵ Or there is the case of the grandfather of Sima Qian's friend Li Ling, General Li Guang, whose great strength and passion is typified in the famous episode where he mistakes a rock for a tiger and shoots an arrow deep into the hard stone. Late in his life, General Li made a critical mistake and was consequently ordered to stand trial for incompetence. The moment for his decision arrived: "I, Guang, am more than sixty years of age. I will never again respond to petty scribes!" He then "drew his knife and slit his own throat."⁵⁶ Or there is General Fan, who had fled the state of Qin and was living in frustration in Yan, hoping always to gain revenge against the king of Qin for the murder of his family. Told that if his own head was presented as a gift, an assassin could get close enough to kill the king, General Fan was overjoyed: "'Day and night I have been gnashing my teeth and growing more deeply distressed over this. Now I have been able to hear your instructions.' He thereupon slit his own throat."⁵⁷

All of these heroes, and many others not listed here, open up the final channel to relieve frustration, and their names are firmly established, their reputations assured, in that moment when they summon the courage to take a last dramatic step. But Sima Qian explains to Ren An, with considerable anguish and self-loathing, that he himself did not choose suicide. Here too, his explanation

conjures up the familiar image of blockage: recalling the violence and terror of his jailers, Sima Qian says that "An accumulation of acts of intimidation gradually restrained me."⁵⁸

Still, the main reason Sima Qian chose to stay alive, at least the main explanation he offers to Ren An, was that he had not yet completed his history of the past. In his case, frustration and humiliation accumulated in the world of action would not be expressed in suicide. Sima Qian, unlike the military heroes he describes with such narrative power, was a man of the written word who would transfer his frustration into the world of literature: "When my draft was not yet complete, I met with this calamity. Therefore, I proceeded to the extreme penalty with no appearance of rancor."⁵⁹ His rancor, in complete accord with his own theory of creativity, is sublimated into a text that would exonerate him posthumously just as it would exonerate others: "I grieve that my heart has that which it has not completely expressed, and that I might die and my writing not be known to later ages. The wealthy and honored of antiquity who have completely perished are too numerous to name."⁶⁰ Sima Qian cannot allow his own name to disappear, just as he cannot allow others to fade unknown into the past. Thus, he concludes his letter by saying that if only his completed history "is passed down to others, penetrating villages and great cities, then although I should receive ten thousand humiliating punishments, what regret would I have."⁶¹

Records of the Historian, like so many of the works Sima Qian admires, is born of frustration. It is a literary effusion, the scholar's equivalent to the violent suicides of heroes like Xiang Yu, General Li, and General Fan. Such an interpretation, I should note, does not imply that all of *Records of the Historian* was written after the Li Ling episode and reflects the pathos of that event; to determine precisely when each chapter of this complex work was actually written is impossible.⁶² But one thing is certain, the same spirit that explains and rationalizes his behavior in the "Letter in Response to Ren An" fills many of Sima Qian's historical narratives and leads the great Lu Xun (1881-1936) to describe *Records of the Historian* as "the ultimate lyric of the historian, a rhymeless 'Encountering Sorrow.'"⁶³ This, "ultimate lyric," born of frustration and passion, casts a net of narrative much more widely than had ever been cast before. The tremendous release of energy, *fa fen*, that produced *Records of the Historian* could not easily be restrained within the boundaries of tradition nor within the tight limits of a sparing text like *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

Sima Qian's comprehensive and fervent treatment of the past

inevitably leads the historian to a profound and self-tortured questioning of all boundaries. This questioning is illustrated most directly in the "Traditions of Bo Yi" (chapter 61), an extremely important chapter that stands at the head of the "Traditions" section, the longest and most literarily significant section of Sima Qian's text. In his "Self-Narration," Sima Qian explains why the chapter on Bo Yi is given such an important position:

In latter ages people struggled for advantage. Only these [Bo Yi and his brother Shu Qi] pursued duty, yielded the state and died of starvation. All under Heaven praise them. [Therefore] I have written "The Traditions of Bo Yi" and have placed it first [in this section].⁶⁴

The chapter on Bo Yi is completely unlike any other of the "Traditions" in at least two ways. First, all other chapters in this section deal with figures who lived during the Eastern Zhou, the Qin, or the Han dynasties (that is, after 771 B.C.E.). This one chapter alone concerns a figure from an earlier period, and it is significantly earlier, the last years of the Yin and the earliest years of the Zhou (ca. 1040 B.C.E.). The anomaly has not gone unnoticed—the Tang historiographer Liu Zhiji (661–721 C.E.), one of Sima Qian's most perceptive critics, wonders why Sima Qian does not include other pre-Eastern Zhou figures. After suggesting several possibilities, Liu says, "Why not select one of these and compile [a chapter] for him?"⁶⁵ Second, the chapter on Bo Yi is stylistically unique. In the typical chapter of this section, Sima Qian narrates the traditions concerning an individual or a group with very few direct comments of his own. Both in the "Traditions" and in the other sections of *Records of the Historian*, Sima Qian reserves his evaluations and comments for the conclusion of the chapter, a "judgment" that is always introduced by the phrase "the Duke Grand Astrologer says." However, in this particular "Traditions" chapter, the actual account of the story of Bo Yi fills less than one-third of the text, while Sima Qian's direct evaluation and discussion of the story occupies the other two-thirds. A judgment at the end of this chapter is unnecessary precisely because the entire chapter is a judgment. The Ming scholar Chen Renxi (1579–1634) is correct in asserting that this chapter "rather seems like an essay and not like a biography."⁶⁶ Whatever great virtues Bo Yi and his brother Shu Qi might have possessed, this chapter clearly is placed at the head of the "Traditions" to serve as an introduction to the entire section. As such, it concerns issues