Introduction

In the reign of Emperor Cheng of Han (r. 32–7 BCE), one of the princes within the imperial household, Prince Dongping, paid a statutory visit to the central court of the empire located in its capital, Chang'an. The prince asked the emperor whether he could take copies of philosophical works and *Taishigong shu* 太史公書 (i.e., *Shiji* 史記, *Records of the Historian*) back to his own enfeoffment.[1] Although *Records of the Historian* was completed around 100 BCE, it was not yet widely circulated when the visit occurred. When the emperor consulted his high minister, Wang Feng 王鳳 (d. 22 BCE), the latter pointed out that the requests were against propriety and that the purpose of a statutory visit—as indicated by its name—was to rectify regulations. Wang explained why princes should not be given access to *Taishigong shu*: "It contains the wily and expedient schemes of the diplomats of the Warring States period, the unusual measures resorted to by the advisers at the time of the founding of the Han, and all the strange occurrences in the realm of the heavens, the strategic points in the territorial lords. None of these is appropriate to be possessed by a regional lord."[2] Furthermore, Wang Feng also suggested specific language for the emperor to use when rejecting the prince's request: since the five classics were regulated by the sages and contain the ten thousand affairs, they were enough to rectify oneself; and the prince could request as many books as he wanted as long as they aid understanding the classics. The emperor heeded Wang Feng's advice and declined both of the prince's requests.

The minister's anxiety about *Records of the Historian* decades after it was completed reflects an early understanding of the text. His concern arose primarily from the facts recorded in the book rather than from the character of its author,[3] Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?–86 BCE),

the great Western Han (202 BCE–8 CE) historian. This understanding of the book in the late Western Han is radically different from the biographical interpretation—*Records of the Historian* is a textual vent of Sima Qian's pain and emotion—that has predominated and been widely accepted since the third century CE. Since Sima Qian was the founding father of Chinese historiography and a genius in Chinese literary history, the question of his intention has shadowed "*Shiji* xue" 史記學 (*Shiji* studies) for centuries. However, it is the monumental work—totaling 526,500 Chinese characters—rather than his intention that cemented his reputation. The text is the first universal history of China and one of the largest narrative works to emerge from Chinese historiography, recounting a period from the origins of Chinese civilization to the reign of the historian's own ruler, Emperor Wu of Han (r. 141–87 BCE). The current study jumps out of Sima Qian's shadow and refocuses on the text per se by providing a systematic narratological analysis of *Records of the Historian*. By restoring the Han text to its place in early Chinese textual history and historiographical evolution, this book examines how narrative devices impact the rhetorical functions of *Records of the Historian*. I shall answer why in early China, when writing was much more laborious than today, historians diligently renarrated events that had been covered by earlier works, and how the historians constructed their visions of the past in their narratives.

Here, I use "narrative" to expand our perspectives on Chinese historical writings and reframe our analysis of these texts. I use this term as the narratologist Gerald Prince defines it: "the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other."[4] Accordingly, a narrative can contain one or multiple episodes that are usually short and freestanding accounts of single events. This definition provides three advantages. First, in addition to "history" and "literature," the definition reveals a previously overlooked dimension of *Records of the Historian* and other texts: narrative. Until now, *Shiji* studies have largely fallen into these two camps—that is, history and literature—because of modern scholars' entrenchment in modern disciplines. In fact, such boundaries in early China were much less explicit, because, in general, political affairs were definitely the core subject of early prose.[5] Second, affirming the textual nature of *Records of the Historian* and other historical writings as narratives allows us to view texts from the perspective of narrative tradition, a practice that has not been implemented before. When we put these texts side by side that were

formed centuries apart, the evolution of historiography becomes more visible. Finally, the term "narrative" accommodates accounts of varied length, from barebones entries written in a handful of words to long and sophisticated chapters comprising thousands of characters.

The Early China period, from the legendary origin of Chinese civilization to the end of the second century CE, was a critical interval in Chinese textual history. After the fourth century BCE, numerous texts were made and circulated, many of which have come to us through transmission and excavation. Recent archaeological findings have brought to light variant versions of received texts, as well as texts that we had never seen before. Appealing to the past was an efficient way to make an argument in any of these texts, most of which center on political themes.[6] In 221 BCE, the Qin's (221–206 BCE) unification of regional powers marked the beginning of the imperial period, which ended in 1911 CE. Yet the short-lived Qin dynasty was replaced by the Han (202 BCE–220 CE),[7] which lasted long enough to implement and consolidate the social changes established by the Qin. These early empires exerted transformative influence in ideology building and textual production whose traces are visible even today. Recent discoveries in manuscript culture show that, through these centuries, Chinese texts underwent a revolutionary transformation from "open" to "closed," an eye-opening finding based on a large number of recently excavated manuscripts from tombs. By "open," I refer to the fact that texts were not stabilized; they were still fluid in organization and even contents. By "closed," I refer to the fact that texts became locked, no longer subject to further editing.[8]

Within this trajectory of the textual transformation, Sima Qian was not just an adept writer or well-known historian; he was also an active creator of this new trend, forging the form of Chinese texts from the early empires to the present. During Emperor Wu's reign, the court eagerly collected countless texts from every corner of the Han empire. At that time, a major component of historians' responsibility was managing the imperial library and archives. Sima Qian thus had access to a wide range of texts and actively participated in cataloguing them,[9] which enabled him to complete *Records of the Historian*. Through this text, Sima greatly contributed to stabilizing early texts in two ways. First, with a cornucopia of writings at his fingertips, Sima built the concept of authorship by attributing particular titles to individual authors, frequently mentioning or quoting from many texts, from a couple of sentences to thousands of words.[10] Second, *Records of the His-*

torian initiated a new stage of textual history—an era of "closed" texts. Despite its uneven quality from chapter to chapter, the text per se is a result of Sima's attempt to build coherent accounts, an endeavor that had not been observed before. The fragmentation and fluidity of most texts before *Records of the Historian* determined that they would tend to have short, isolated, and self-contained passages. Narrative collections often organized texts according to the chronology, theme, and subject they recounted. Sima Qian broke with previous practices and created a new framework for unified and stabilized accounts. When possible, he streamlined individual episodes into an integrated chapter with a fixed linear structure. He designed his exquisite chapters with a fixed textual sequence that the reader must follow in order to seek meaning. Setting *Records of the Historian* against both excavated and received texts shows that Sima Qian lived at a turning point of Chinese textual history and that during this formative period of new literary concepts, *Records of the Historian* was one of the earliest texts that manifest the role of an author in the modern sense.

Historical writings not only experienced the trend of textual stabilization but also reached their peak within this transformative era. It is within this historical context that I analyze the relationship between the form and rhetorical function of historical writings, new territory in Chinese historiography. In particular, these texts deserve special attention because their primary form, narrative, is heavily subject to structural manipulation, which then leads to shifts in meaning. Although these histories all center on matters of political significance, such as battles, power, morality, and order, and some even recount the same facts, historians imbued their texts with different ideologies within various periods of the trend of textual stabilization. Before *Records of the Historian*, the most influential historical text, *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (*Zuo Commentary*),[11] dated to the fourth century BCE, follows an annalistic framework; after *Records of the Historian*, *Hanshu* 漢書 (*History of the Han*)[12] was completed around 80 CE with an overall structure heavily influenced by *Records of the Historian*. As the linchpin in this evolution, *Records of the Historian* uses *Zuo Commentary* as one of its major sources while providing *History of the Han* with a large amount of material. During the golden age of Chinese historical writings, these histories demonstrate different modes of representing the past.

The central argument of the current study is that historians in different stages of early China employed various narrative devices to

retell their own vision of the past. Specifically, the narrative structure of *Records of the Historian* gives rise to its emphasis on overall, interrelated, long-term historical processes—elevating them to a level that they become as important as, or even more important than, the outcome of an event. Earlier and later histories such as *Zuo Commentary* and *History of the Han* primarily focus on single events: the former predominantly explains historical events through the lens of morality and ritual propriety; the latter principally judges historical figures on the basis of isolated facts. It is *Records of the Historian*'s unparalleled emphasis on the processes that makes the text an outlier among early Chinese historical writings, prompting readers to extract their individual lessons from *Records of the Historian*.

The Tradition of Biographical Reading

Although narrative in nature, early historical works have received little attention from a narratological perspective.[13] Beginning with the Six Dynasties (220–589), premodern scholars mostly based their interpretations of *Records of the Historian* on reading Sima Qian's biographical experiences into the text, a result of the long Chinese tradition of emphasizing authorial intent. This method pays close attention to the author's feelings and emotions, using them to interpret literary works, whether poems or prose. This approach holds that authors encode feelings and emotions in their works and thereby convey their intentions to the reader. In this situation, a qualified reader is expected to not only read the words as written but also to grasp the hidden meaning that the author embedded between the lines. This deep communication reaches beyond straightforward reading; it was considered the ultimate way to appreciate the beauty of literature.

This literary tradition of seeking out authorial intent has also been applied in Chinese historiography since the Han. The most prominent example is the Confucian classic *Chunqiu* 春秋 (*Annals of Spring and Autumn*), a laconic chronicle traditionally attributed to Confucius (551–479 BCE) that lists significant events from 722 to 481 BCE. It was believed that the sage composed (or edited) the *Chunqiu* out of political frustration and encoded great righteousness in subtle words (*weiyan dayi* 微言大義) in this book with the intention of criticizing the son of Heaven, restricting the regional lords, and attacking the grandees (貶天子，退諸

侯, 討大夫) during the turbulent era that he lived in. Commentators from later generations have interpreted the revered classic by searching for Confucius's hidden intention.

This tradition has set the tone for interpreting *Records of the Historian*. For generations, scholars have looked for clues to Sima Qian's intention from his biographical experiences. Two crucial questions have been particularly emphasized: how he started to work on *Records of the Historian* and why he was punished by castration. Together, the underlying events have created Sima Qian's persona as a heroic writer in numerous readers' minds. The first is narrated in the postface (chapter 130) of *Records of the Historian*, "Taishigong zixu" 太史公自序 (The Grand Historian's Self-Narration), which tells us that Sima Qian took over the project from his father. As an earlier historian at Emperor Wu's court, the father had initiated *Records of the Historian* but could not complete it because of a fatal illness; on his deathbed, he entrusted the task of continuing *Records of the Historian* to his son.[14] Later, Sima Qian succeeded to his father's position at the court and completed the book by taking Confucius as his model.

The second key event, Sima Qian's castration, is one of the most famous tragedies in Chinese literary history, yet this incident is not recounted in *Records of the Historian* but in the "Bao Ren An shu" 報任安書 (The Letter in Reply to Ren An),[15] a letter of uncertain authorship[16] but believed to be Sima Qian's response to the contemporary official Ren An (d. 91 BCE). It recalls that General Li Ling 李陵 joined a military campaign against the Xiongnu, a nomadic enemy group in the north. Although he had fought with great courage in a hopeless situation, the general eventually surrendered to the enemy, a fact that the emperor regarded as a stigma on the Han. Sima Qian's defense of the general at court enraged Emperor Wu, causing the throne to charge Sima with *wuwang* 誣罔 (prevarication and deceit).[17] Facing the sentence of death, Sima chose to be castrated as an alternative penalty, even though this was an extreme disgrace for his entire lineage. In order to finish *Records of the Historian*, he did not make the easier decision to commit suicide.[18]

Having records of these two major incidents has made it plausible to infer a relationship between the incidents and Sima Qian's motivation for composing *Records of the Historian*. Since the Six Dynasties, Sima has been cast in three basic roles: a filial son who hopes to redeem himself from the shame of castration; a great historian who follows Confucius's footsteps to promote good order; a suffering writer who wishes to vent

his resentment through his composition. Thereafter, *Records of the Historian* has been accordingly interpreted, first, as a text that was written to achieve eternal glory for the Sima family. To establish one's words (*liyan* 立言) was considered a legitimate means to secure the reputation of an author and his family.[19] Second, *Records of the Historian* is an emulation of Confucius's *Annals*, targeted at Emperor Wu or the First Emperor of Qin, who were both believed to have ruled by force. Lastly, Sima Qian used his brush to express the pain resulting from his shameful misfortune; *Records of the Historian* is thus a medium through which to seek true understanding of what it means to be a gentleman (*junzi* 君子).[20] The compatibility of these roles has led scholars of many generations, premodern and modern, to combine them to strengthen their specific interpretations. Their shared use of the biographical approach has not resulted in consensus; however, fundamentally contradictory arguments are common.[21]

The biographical reading offers a psychological lens to examine *Records of the Historian*, providing potential ways to understand it. This model of interpretation, which later became so influential, was not, however, the mainstream understanding of the text in early China. The negative view of *Records of the Historian* expressed by Emperor Cheng's high minister, as seen in the story at the beginning of this introduction—*Records of the Historian*'s contents are not in line with Confucian classics—was dominant by the end of the Western Han. Han scholars such as Yang Xiong (53 BCE–18 CE), Ban Biao (3–54 CE), and Ban Gu (32–92 CE) represent this criticizing view.[22] The Sima Qian discussed in subsequent literary analysis is not the historical Sima but his persona that shifted with the historical context of readers from various periods.[23]

Moreover, it is doubtful that one consistent philosophy can be extracted from the representation of all past events in *Records of the Historian*, as the massive text is heterogeneous and largely consists of two types of accounts, which I shall call the composite and the composed. The descriptions of events from China's legendary beginning to the Qin are mostly based on preexisting materials[24] over which Sima Qian did not have full control, despite his efforts to arrange them in a certain form. Several times in *Records of the Historian* he laments the lack of sources, which prevented him from completely controlling his text in two respects. First, he had meager fragments from texts antedating the dawn of Han and therefore could not integrate the individual components as an organic account. Second, the scarcity of sources prevented

the historian from adding his own understanding of the events into *Records of the Historian*; the sources dictated his accounts. These chapters vary in degrees of integration but remain, overall, in a composite form, preventing us from inferring a clear and consistent intention on the part of the historian. Although patchy accounts and dull narratives constitute part of *Records of the Historian*, Sima's reputation as a master of literature has led critics to neglect these chapters.[25]

On the other hand, the chapters devoted to the Qin-Han transition and the Han dynasty are mostly a result of Sima's own composition. As previously noted, as a historian of the Han court, he had access to all kinds of earlier texts, official documents, and archives that the Qin left and the Han preserved in the imperial library. In addition, Sima Qian was not an armchair historian, relying solely on written sources. His position allowed for travel alongside the emperor. Scattered information in *Records of the Historian* suggests the use of oral sources such as transmitted traditions and his personal observations in various regions. Moreover, Sima also sought evidence from other channels, such as interviews with older officials and even their extended families, in order to handle contradictory information critically.[26] With more raw materials collected in many different ways, the "composed" chapters in *Records of the Historian* often exhibit a higher level of textual control than the "composite" accounts. In writing the former, Sima Qian had more freedom in identifying connections between events, interpreting their impacts, and building them into a logical chain that he believed in. *Records of the Historian*'s complexity naturally leads to constant disagreements over Sima Qian's supposed intentions.

More importantly, even if Sima Qian's intentions were consistent and unwaveringly applied—a questionable premise—it still would not follow that biographical reading is the only valid approach to *Records of the Historian*. Indeed, authorial intent is not always achievable. In 1946, William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley challenged the idea that a poem can always successfully convey the author's intention. Questioning the value of authorial intention for literary criticism, they argued: "One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem—for

evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem."[27] This is to say that while the author's intention(s) may have given rise to a poem, such motivations are typically neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of the poem. As soon as a poem has a reader, it belongs to the public, not the author.

In 1975, the German literary critic Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) analyzed how texts become meaningful to individual readers in the reading process in general. Without denying the possibility that the reader may grasp the author's intention, Gadamer pointed out that the limited capability of language and the reader's impulsive participation during the reading process inevitably cause divergent interpretations of a single text. This is because our understanding or interpretation of objects and events is always conditioned or shaped by our historical situation in ways that are not transparent even to ourselves. A circumstance does not so much impede as enable knowledge and experience; when we comprehend something (a text, for instance), we always understand it differently from the way others understand it, a difference that does not necessarily amount to an error in judgment. Even the same reader may respond differently when he or she reads the same work at different stages of life.[28]

These twentieth-century insights prompt a reexamination of the goal(s) behind analyzing Sima's authorial intent. He certainly compiled *Records of the Historian* with some intentions in mind, and he may or may not have revised those intentions after his castration (it remains unclear exactly when this incident occurred and whether it was a cause or result of *Records of the Historian*); but this does not imply that there is only one way to understand *Records of the Historian*. The very multiplicity of the debates—whether a word, sentence, or chapter in the text is a satire; whether Emperor Wu or the First Emperor was Sima's target; and so on—corresponds to the divergence of interpretations that Gadamer analyzes. These interpretations are the results of various readers' reactions in their own age and environment.

In sum, this is not to deny the value of the biographical approach as one way to interpret *Records of the Historian*. The meticulous, centuries-long examination of Sima Qian's personal experiences has contributed to our understanding of his role as a prominent historical figure and of the circumstances of the era in which he lived. Yet the extreme richness of *Records of the Historian* demands that the text be opened up to other potential interpretive approaches.

Returning to the Narratives

The current study aims to shift our attention from authorial intention to the text itself. It is the narratives in *Records of the Historian*, rather than Sima Qian's intentions, that establish the text's monumental stature in Chinese historiography and literary history. Instead of reading between the lines to identify hidden intentions, the current study examines the relationship between *Records of the Historian*'s structure and rhetorical function, opening an alternative window to interpret the text.

Sima Qian created a model that organizes *Records of the Historian*'s one hundred and thirty chapters into five divisions: twelve chapters in the form of *benji* 本紀 (Basic Annals) are devoted to early dynasties as well as individual rulers in the Qin-Han era;[29] the ten chapters of *biao* 表 (Tables) list major events chronologically and report the sequence of rulers, famous ministers, and other noteworthy figures; the eight chapters of *shu* 書 (Treatises) cover a wide range of crucial political and administrative topics, including rites, music, military power, the calendar, astrology, sacrifices, topography, and economy; the thirty chapters in the *Shijia* 世家 (Hereditary Houses) section describe promising families of the Zhou and Han dynasties, recounting their rise and fall over generations; and the seventy chapters in the most widely read section, *liezhuan* 列傳[30] (Arrayed Traditions), recall diverse persons, including statesmen, generals, jokesters, fortune tellers, assassins, women, ethnic groups from neighboring lands, and so on. Despite the differentiation of the five sections, all of the chapters consist of narratives; each chapter has a theme and contains one or multiple accounts. The subjects of the accounts vary, but all the accounts primarily center on historical figures within the political realm.

Within the accounts, Sima Qian's most innovative contribution to Chinese historiography and textual tradition was their unprecedented narrative structure. Earlier historical works were largely self-contained episodes of single events organized on annalistic or geographic principles. *Records of the Historian* marks the appearance of the first complete and coherent historiographical accounts assembled from a series of episodes; many scattered and self-contained anecdotes of earlier histories became full accounts following a storyline with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. These storylines usually commence with the subject's birth and end with his or her death, or proceed from the subject's rise and fall seen from some particular perspective. This creative linear sequence that frames many accounts enables meticulous arrangement and correlation between

multiple episodes to illuminate a subject's life journey. The biographical accounts of historical figures in the *liezhuan* section heralded biography as a genre in Chinese textual history.

Narratology analyzes how structural changes affect meanings of what is narrated, integrating contents and form seamlessly. This focus on the relationship between textual structure and narrative meaning allows us to put aside Sima Qian's intention and return to *Records of the Historian*. In this study, I apply narratological theories from Gérard Genette (1930–2018), who examined the common features of narratives by focusing on their structures. By placing *Records of the Historian* and other influential narrative texts into this framework, I systematically examine three dimensions of these texts: how the sequence of events builds causality, what is slowed down and sped up to control information, and how the text provides multiple perspectives to view the same events.

Genette treats narrative as an assemblage of information regarding one or more events. In order to reveal a narrator's manipulation of a narrative, Genette distinguishes "between the narrative text, the story it recounts, and the narrating instance (the producing narrative act—as inscribed in the text—and the context in which that act occurs)."[31] Genette points out that "analysis of narrative discourse is essentially a study of three sets of relations between narrative and story, between narrative and narrating, and (to the extent that they are inscribed in the narrative discourse) between story and narrating."[32] Through these three sets of relations, the theorist reveals the differences between story and narrative, revealing which structural changes affect the writer's feeding of information to the reader.

Historians' task is to narrate, turning bygone events into narratives. As Hayden White points out, "Histories (and philosophies of history as well) combine a certain amount of 'data,' theoretical concepts for 'explaining' these data, and a narrative structure for their presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past."[33] It is unsurprising that the same events can be represented in remarkably different ways in texts; when narrating the past, historians inevitably bring their personal perceptions and the historical context of their age into their accounts. In doing so, historians need not change the basic facts, such as the major participants, their actions, and the outcome; nor are they allowed by custom to do so. Any single technique or combination of these—connecting two events with a different logic, controlling the amount of information, and changing the perspective—already suffices

to shift the emphasis or even brings to bear an opposite reading of the same events, consciously or unconsciously. Thus, a historian's retelling is only one possible version of the past.

Among the dimensions of narrative that Genette examined, three are of particular value to historical writing. The first deals with temporal distortions (that is, manipulation of the chronological order of events), which affect relationships of linking, alternation, and/or embedding among the different lines of action that make up the story. Regarding the sequence in which events actually occurred and their order in the narrative, there are four types of relationships: chronological order, prolepsis (prophecy), analepsis (flashback), and the sequenced reporting of simultaneous scenes. Through these temporal manipulations, early Chinese historians integrated moral codes, obedience to rules of ritual, inner qualities of historical figures, and other elements into a cause-and-effect chain in a narrative, building the causality of the past.

The second dimension is about narrative information management. The narrator controls the narrative "representation," or, more precisely, narrative information. For example, how many details should be furnished? In what way(s)? Like other narrators, historians inevitably need to decide what can be omitted, what deserves to be included, and to what degree they want to elaborate on details when reporting episodes. When historians speed up their narration, readers receive less information; when the narration slows down, readers have access to more details. Comparisons between *Records of the Historian* and both earlier and later histories shed light on its pattern of abbreviating and expanding, helping us see where the historians spend their valuable energy and clarifying their emphases in the text.

The third dimension that is particularly inspiring for analyzing historical writings is point of view, which filters information through the perspective of the narrator or a character. When a narrative describes an event, the reader receives information through one or more points of view, whether from a character within an account or from the historian who narrates the story. Point of view is conditioned by identity, social status, perception of political issues, and many other factors. Through a character's speeches and thought, historical writings present one or more perspectives of the participants who act within various relationships in the political realm. The interactions and correlations among characters inspire readers to contemplate their own explanation of the reported history.

My application of theories originating from a non-Chinese tradition may trouble some readers. Admittedly, Chinese historiography has been a long-lasting practice and has developed its own characteristics; and Genette's theories are based on French literary works. However, his framework is not affected by the language in which the tale is told but, rather, analyzes generic structural dimensions that mold a narrative regardless of its media and originating culture. It is exactly the exotic origin of this framework that allows us to break free of certain entrenched constraints.

This new approach entails four methodological shifts. First, Genette's framework refocuses attention from the author's intention and biographical experiences to the narratives per se, letting the historical writings speak for themselves. Despite the impressive work that scholars have done to infer Sima Qian's motivations, such inferences remain speculative or vague in many cases. In contrast, Sima Qian's editorial traces are a solid reflection of the narrative devices that he used. Moreover, this new approach permits the interpretation of narrative texts of unknown or imprecise authorship. A large number of texts dated to early China are not connected to an author or are results of multiple hands across a long period of time; and even for those with widely accepted authorship, the attribution may be anachronistic.[34]

Second, we leave behind the notion of "*Chunqiu*" *bifa* 春秋筆法 (lit., the method of writing the *Annals of Spring and Autumn*), which is based on the traditional belief that Confucius carefully selected the words of the *Annals* to convey his penetrating criticism. Although the question of whether the canon has systematically applied this method of writing remains unresolved, many historians have followed (their conception of) Confucius's model. Some late imperial and modern scholars have asserted that *Records of the Historian* also adopts this method;[35] but there have been no systematic studies of the extent of its application. On the contrary, the detailed descriptions, creative structure, and complex narratives of *Records of the Historian* reveal Sima Qian's heavy divergence from the classic, and the ideal of reading *Records of the Historian* as some kind of latter-day *Chunqiu* is not compatible with the rich narrative features of *Records of the Historian* that I have listed.

Third, the narrative approach advances the study of complicated texts. In moving away from applying authorial intention, we can render contradictory facts and disconnected records in histories more amena-

ble to analysis. Admitting that historians do not fully control their sources, we would not look for a tidy narration, attempt to rationalize patchy or inconsistent accounts, or select some pieces of "evidence" and ignore others. Our scope of examination extends from the chapters that are commonly regarded as compositional models to the accounts that are less unified and are seldom analyzed by literary scholars, for all the imperfections within these chapters disclose the difficulties facing historians and the arduous processes of editing that are elided in more integrated accounts. It is the imperfect accounts *and* the exquisite ones, taken together, that restore the true role that Sima Qian played at the turning point of Chinese textual history.

Fourth, examining *Records of the Historian* from the narratological perspective empowers us to transcend the arbitrary boundaries set by premodern concepts and modern disciplines. Despite the common narrative nature of history and *xiaoshuo* 小說 (fiction; lit., lesser speech—i.e., speech of lesser moral value), both of which require imaginative descriptions, premodern Chinese scholars deliberately drew a borderline between them. In premodern China, history was practiced and revered from private literary circles all the way to the imperial court, whereas *xiaoshuo*'s humble purpose of entertainment concealed their shared nature. Moreover, conservative critics bristle at the very suggestion of comparing history with *xiaoshuo*, on the grounds that one is truth and the other fiction. But treating them both as narrative allows us to draw an evolutive outline of the structural development of narrative texts.

Placing Sima Qian into the full context of Chinese historiography allows me to redefine his role in a broad sense. He was much more than a historian who edited and composed a historical work; nor was he simply a master of literature who built his reputation through literary skills. Rather, he was one of the pioneers who played a key role in turning fluid and fragmented passages into connected, coherent, fully formed compositions. Thereafter, unification and coherence became the common features for any full accounts, completely transforming the practice of reading and composition. With a stabilized textual sequence, literary techniques such as character development, creating suspense 懸念, and structural correspondence 結構呼應 all became possible. The examination of *Records of the Historian*'s place among early Chinese texts illuminates Sima Qian's defining influence in literary history and textual studies.

By showing Sima Qian's use of narrative devices in *Records of the Historian* and their effects in differentiating *Records of the Historian*

from *Zuo Commentary* and *History of the Han*, this broad picture raises a missing subject in the current scholarship on Chinese historiography: the relationship between narrative structure and the rhetorical functions of Chinese historical writings. This issue deserves our attention. Early historians retold the past in different forms and styles, at times even rewriting historical events. Yet—in part due to the *"Chunqiu" bifa*'s reinforcement of the moral and didactic dimensions of historical writings—scholars have seldom analyzed what functions are fulfilled by historical writings. From the preimperial period to the Han dynasty, Chinese historical writings developed three major models—represented by *Zuo Commentary*, *Records of the Historian*, and *History of the Han*—all demonstrating textual characteristics and thereby causing divergences in their primary functions. The narratological analysis of these works allows us to understand how historians' manipulation of narrative structure affects the texts' rhetorical functions. The majority of entries in *Zuo Commentary* highlight the strong correspondence between causes and outcomes, promoting morality and ritual-obedience as the internal drive of historical direction. A large number of narratives in *History of the Han* mainly emphasize a character's performances in individual events, which, when assembled, provide a foundation of facts for a rational judge of moral standing. In contrast with these texts, *Records of the Historian* prioritizes the complicated and logical historical process that a dynasty, a state, a lineage, a historical person always experiences from rise to decline, prompting readers to extract their own lessons.

The discrepancy between the primary rhetorical functions of *Records of the Historian* and those of *History of the Han* elucidates the development of narrative literature and dynastic histories. *Records of the Historian*'s exposition of a story's progression affords a prototype for Chinese narrative texts, particularly novels and fiction produced in the late imperial period. Numerous scholars and writers admirably emulated its structure and style to tell an interesting tale, whose reading pleasure comes from experiencing the process rather than merely knowing the outcome of events or what triggered that outcome. As the first dynastic history, *History of the Han* is a powerful model as it establishes standards of right and wrongdoings. Many later dynastic histories were modeled after *History of the Han*, rather than *Records of the Historian*, in their judgments of historical figures' actions. For these works, an interlocked and logical process is of less importance than connecting morality with political legitimacy, which is more practical and efficient in explaining a

power's existence. Understanding the priorities of *Records of the Historian* and *History of the Han* is valuable for grasping their strong influence in literature and historiography, respectively.

Structure of the Book

It is a great fortune that, with the remarkable increase in the number of excavated manuscripts and the substantial number of historical works transmitted from early China, we have enough materials to place *Records of the Historian* in the evolution of historiography and, more broadly, the development of textual history. To illuminate the characteristics of *Records of the Historian*, I compare it with many other historical texts in the pages that follow. The two most frequently cited in this volume are *Zuo Commentary* and *History of the Han*. *Zuo Commentary* was compiled about two hundred years earlier than *Records of the Historian*, in the fourth century BCE.[36] As the lengthiest text extant from this era, it is the most significant source for events during the period it covers. As the fountainhead of the Chinese historiographical tradition, it has been transmitted as a commentary to *Chunqiu*, which gave its name to this period. (Unlike *Chunqiu*, *Zuo Commentary* does not stop at 481 BCE but carries the narrative to 468 BCE.) *Records of the Historian* refers to many events in the extant *Zuo Commentary*. *History of the Han* was compiled approximately 150 years after *Records of the Historian* by Ban Gu (and others).[37] *Records of the Historian* provided a large amount of material for *History of the Han*, which narrates the Western Han dynasty from its founding in 202 BCE to the death of the usurper Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BCE–23 CE). Because of the overlapping of time periods and sequences of compilation, parallel accounts between *Records of the Historian* and *Zuo Commentary* and between *Records of the Historian* and *History of the Han* allow for a comparative study of these histories.

This study consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 analyzes the transformation of reading sequence and its influence on the textual structure of *Records of the Historian*. Manuscripts from before and during Sima's time were largely open, loose, and fragmented passages, which did not impose a fixed reading order. Narrative units, as a category of these texts, tended to be short and self-contained passages that did not rely on a larger context of the book to convey meaning. Readers could thus pick one passage and move on to any other passage. *Records of*

the Historian is the earliest extant text that shows an effort to connect individual anecdotes into a full and interrelated account of a historical person or subject. Despite the disintegration of certain chapters, many accounts demonstrate a strong effort to build coherent storylines, which are a precondition for foreshadowing, correspondence, twists, suspense, and character development. In the most successful chapters, the textual coherency empowered by the well-designed structure is so forceful that the reader must follow the events in their presented order. This revolutionary practice enormously extended the length of narratives, strengthened the overall textual stability, and enabled Sima Qian to put a representation of meaningful historical process at the center. This textual form established biographical writing as a genre in Chinese literary studies and provided a model of highlighting a coherent plotline for later novels and fiction.

Chapter 2 explores the temporal order of events in the *Records of the Historian*. Historians set up direct or indirect connections between earlier and later events in various ways, inspiring their readers to contemplate the causes of historical direction. I discuss four types of temporal sequence in narratology: the chronological type, the simultaneous type, prolepsis (anticipation), and analepsis (flashback), all of which are employed in *Records of the Historian*. Respectively, these types highlight cumulative causes, situational stimuli, the essential inner quality of character, and specific actions. By using these types of temporal sequences, Sima Qian built an unprecedentedly complicated causality. In contrast to *Zuo Commentary*, *Records of the Historian* presents multiple factors across time rather than identifying one cause for each outcome; in contrast to *History of the Han*, *Records of the Historian* highlights the overall logical chain rather than assembling facts under the name of a historical figure.

Chapter 3 examines the narrative speed of *Records of the Historian*—that is, where the text slows down or speeds up, and where it zooms in and out. The book shows a pattern in manifesting a continuous and accumulated process of power struggles. Two examples of usurpation—the Tian lineage's usurpation of Qi (eighth–fifth century BCE) and Empress Dowager Lü's (241–180 BCE) administration in Han—show that the text devotes more space to explain the rise and decline of powers. The narratives often slow down to provide substantial details regarding a historical figure's key strategies and their cumulative effects in the appropriation of power. The painstaking portrayals of a string of well-connected actions in *Records of the Historian* would be redundant for the purpose of teaching morality but display how the big changes took

place. An ambitious reader in the political realm could even copy the process. In contrast, the parallel narratives of these two examples in *Zuo Commentary* and *History of the Han* highlight isolated facts for didactic purposes. The recurrent pattern of *Records of the Historian* reveals that the text is more concerned with the complexity of the historical process that occurred than with judging the morality of individual actions.

Chapter 4 switches to how *Records of the Historian* offers blended points of view in narration. Characters' direct speeches, intentions, and actions in *Records of the Historian* advance a convergent point of view. In particular, *Records of the Historian* goes further than its predecessors in presenting the characters' own perspectives. It is the earliest history to include numerous inner thoughts of the characters through descriptions of their speeches and intentions. Works such as *Zuo Commentary* and *Guoyu* 國語 (Discourses of the States) contain detailed descriptions of battles and discussions, but they do not often include individual characters' emotions, desires, and mental process. Unlike the characters in these earlier works, who speak for the authors behind the text as the authors try to convey moral lessons, *Records of the Historian* gives more freedom to its protagonists, antagonists, and supporting roles. Through multiple points of view that well match with characters' identities, readers of *Records of the Historian* understand the same events from multiple characters' motivations and pursuits in two important relationships in early China: that between ruler and minister and that between husband and wife. The dynamics—traced from submerged intentions to observable behavior—define boundaries of representative relationships in political realms.

For my textual analysis of stories, I have relied heavily on the extant *Zuo Commentary*, *Records of the Historian*, and *History of the Han* and have selected the representations of events dated to a wide range of historical periods. Although a complete understanding of all three voluminous books is unrealistic, this study attempts to capture a glimpse of their narrative characteristics. By presenting a useful narratological tool, this text-focused model expands our perspective on the premodern hermeneutic tradition and the evolution process of Chinese texts. In addition to offering specialists a new perspective for approaching historiographical texts, this study also contributes to our knowledge of Chinese narrative tradition.