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Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo: Sima Qian's Conquest of History (review)

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Grant Hardy. *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo: Sima Qian's Conquest of History*. New York: Columbia UP, 1999. 301 pp. ISBN 0-231-11304-8, \$42.50.

Readers of *Biography* surely know Sima Qian (ca. 145–ca. 86 B.C.E.), or should. (For those unfamiliar, he was the compiler of China's most influential work of history and biography, the 130 chapter *Shi ji* [also romanized *Shih chi*], *Records of the Historian*,¹ a monument of vast scope and insight, still one of China's most read classical works. Sima was the man's family name, Qian his given name [also romanized as Ssu-ma Ch'ien].) As Grant Hardy relates at the outset of his provocative and thoroughgoing treatment of the man and his opus, "after Confucius and the First Emperor of Qin, Sima Qian was one of the creators of Imperial China"; indeed, "he virtually created the two earlier figures" (xi). Again, in Hardy's cogent phrasing, "Sima Qian's book became a foundational text in Chinese civilization. Sima wrote a universal history . . . and in doing so, he defined what it meant to be Chinese." These are bold statements. But I will not quibble here, for Hardy's broad and insightful analysis of Sima Qian's "universal history" progresses to its conclusion with the relentless propulsion of the tides at Mont-Saint-Michel.

Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo is, in the author's opening words, "a book about another book." It is not about an individual, per se, yet in the end it clearly also is about Sima Qian—it is, after all, subtitled "Sima Qian's conquest of history." For Sima's *Shi ji* was by and large formulated and executed by one determined individual, and it stands as the inescapable and principal fount for surmise about Sima Qian's own intentions in carrying his grand oeuvre to fruition. Sima Qian was the scribe par excellence for the Han court. As the Grand Astrologer—the official recorder of all phenomena, an inherited post—he was responsible for recording not only the consecutive happenings in the human world, but also relevant events in the terrestrial and celestial worlds. He had full access to the imperial archives. The *Shi ji* quotes more than eighty texts, as well as numerous memorials, edicts, and stone inscriptions (43). But when Sima Qian defended a military officer—Sima Qian believed that the general's surrender to a northern chieftain was an appropriate, even noble act, undertaken on account of circumstance (in this case, military inattentiveness on the part of the court), compassion, and the hope of future service to the court—this defense was taken as an offense by the emperor. However, Sima Qian did not requite his offense by suicide, as would have been appropriate, customary, and in most ways honorable. Instead, driven as he was to complete his private project of writing a comprehensive, universal history, he accepted the alternative punishment of castration.

Sima Qian tells us this quite clearly in a letter to his friend Ren An, one of the most moving and poignant of Chinese writings ever: “If I concealed my feelings and clung to life, burying myself in filth without protest, it was because I could not bear to leave unfinished my deeply cherished project, because I rejected the idea of dying without leaving to posterity my literary work.”² Sima Qian cites many examples of famous historical figures who, in their time of crisis, wrote books that ultimately brought them their due recognition by posterity. At base Sima Qian wished to embed his personal philosophy in a universal history, “in the hope that someday people like himself would read it, recognize his worth, and justify his life” (211).³ Certainly, Sima Qian has gained posthumous redemption and an enduring legacy on account of the *Shi ji*. Hardy’s thesis is that Sima Qian sought for more than the respect of later ages. He designed the *Shi ji* as a textual microcosm, an intentional and deliberate replica of the entire past, one that functioned not only as a universal history, but also had immediate relevancy to the present and implications for the future as well. In short, “Sima Qian intended his work to transform not only studious, like-minded individuals but also the world itself” (141). “Sima’s book is not just an account of all the times and places known to him,” Hardy explains, “it is a history for all time,” interesting “not just as a relic of a particular time, but also as a world that generation after generation could enter into, argue with, and interpret” (217–18). Indeed, Hardy believes that “the *Shi ji* seems to function somewhat independently of its author”:

Because the *Shi ji* is a representation of the world itself, rather than simply an expression of Sima Qian’s own opinions, it is possible for readers to discover moral lessons and patterns that escaped Sima. In fact, he clearly expected that he was providing data for future inquiries that might go beyond or even be at variance with his own reconstructions. (215)

Hardy is an unabashed *Shi ji* devotee: he believes that Sima Qian was a “brilliant, innovative designer” who “designed it to change the world” (231 n. 43, 229 n. 31). In bringing all of history together, Sima Qian effectively wrested control of the past from the First August Emperor of Qin, the man who unified China in 221 B.C.E. and whose burial entourage included the now world famous terracotta warriors. This is Sima Qian’s “Conquest of History,” wherein the transforming power of his “World of Bamboo” subverts and overcomes the First Emperor’s archetypal “World of Bronze.” “Bronze” is metonymy for the force of arms and the validation of the ruler’s world through inscriptions on bronze vessels and stone monuments. “Bamboo” stands for the civil and moral force of writings; writings of the time primarily were written with brush and ink on bamboo strips, and the *Shi ji*’s thousands of strips in 130 bundles would have filled an entire cart. Hardy’s

arguments go beyond the metaphorical: “I believe that the *Shiji* is Sima’s bid to usurp the world order established by force in the Qin dynasty. In contrast to the coercion and punishments used by the First Emperor, Sima sought to reestablish morality as the basis for ordering the state and human society” (169; see also 217). He continues the contrast:

Indeed, the First Emperor and Sima Qian seem to be polar opposites—dictator and victim, military lord and bureaucrat, Legalist and Confucian, destroyer of the past and historian—but . . . the two men were actually engaged in the same conquest. Each sought to define the world by reordering history, naming and categorizing, and controlling the foundations of discourse. . . . Sima Qian wrote a history whose intent was to undo, point by point, the ideological constructs of the First Emperor. (184)

The renowned Sinologist Derk Bodde once wrote that the infamous burning of the books ordered by the First Emperor paradoxically led to a “cult of books in China” and reinforced a conviction of the authority of writings from the past (10). Sima Qian’s conquest of history was undertaken in this context. “The First Emperor needed to reinterpret the past in order to control the present,” writes Hardy (178); how about our Han dynasty compiler of a microcosmic universal history? Sima Qian viewed the past as a source of identity and direction, as did most Chinese of his time. But according to Hardy, he also had his own agenda—contemporary politics: he feared that the Legalist techniques of the Qin might reappear in the rule of his own time under Emperor Wu (22, 189). But surely the *Shi ji* is not just a critique of Emperor Wu and his policies (a view of many readers since the Later Han). Sima Qian’s “real target was the First Emperor. His goal was to overthrow the archetypal world of bronze” through “the transforming power of his bamboo world” (190, 193). In his battle to restore the moral force in his contemporaries and in posterity, Sima Qian’s historical writings were formulated to lead readers to confront inexorable questions, such as (and especially) why the just do not always receive their just rewards. (Looking beyond Sima Qian’s own circumstances, the *Shi ji*—and virtually all of Chinese history—is peppered with examples, many of which Hardy amply describes.) Hardy argues that Sima Qian “believes in a natural moral order inherent in the universe” (217), and that he “wanted to produce a history that was as accurate as possible while at the same time writing in a didactic fashion that emphasized moral lessons. . . . The *Shiji* is a model designed to help us discover moral principles” (124–25).

But, according to Hardy, “The *Shiji*’s most important contribution to historical studies is not its message but its methodology” (209). Perhaps due in part to his perspicuity, or in part to his personal experience, Sima Qian found a way to incorporate the complexities of the world into his history

even while setting them down on orderly strips of bamboo: “what Sima has grasped—and what the innovative structure of his history expresses so well—is that the same event can have different meanings in different contexts and that people often have multiple intentions for single actions” (71; cf. 75); “the *Shiji* replicates some of the confusions and uncertainties presented by our evidence of the past, rather than creating a new, streamlined version of history” (81). As editor of existing materials, Sima Qian’s presence is ubiquitous, but it also is indeterminate, and it often is difficult to determine his own writing from that of the many sources he has incorporated; moreover, events are not recounted in a unified narrative (44–45). Hardy’s resolution is that Sima Qian was a purposeful editor, and that fragmented and overlapping (sometimes contradictory) accounts were deliberate. The *Shi ji*, as a reconstruction of the past, “intentionally replicates, though to a lesser degree, the confusing inconsistencies, the lack of interpretive closure, and the bewildering details of raw historical data” (47–48):

The universe that Sima Qian creates is in fact a multiverse, one that allows the construal of myriad lines of cause and effect coursing through space and time. As Sima Qian relativizes the past, he also steps back from absolutizing the present. . . . The *Shiji* is a tool by which multiple pasts can be connected to possible futures, and . . . was written for future readers, who would use it to form their own judgments and to meet their own needs, whatever those might be. . . . The goal of his historical labors is not unimpeachable truth, but a flexible, useful understanding. (216)

Hardy’s analysis shows the *Shi ji* as a broad and daring lesson in historiography—“Sima seems intent on forcing readers . . . to become their own historians” (45; cf. 64, 73). Indeed, Hardy writes that “Sima’s method of historical exposition forces readers into a hermeneutical relationship with the text, constantly rereading and comparing, testing hypotheses and changing interpretations” (91). And the *Shi ji* also is shown to be a mirror for deeper understanding. For, “in the end we must move beyond the limits of rationality if we are to truly understand the meaning of history,” and “we must join with Sima Qian in his encounter with the past if we wish to learn sageliness” (209). This is because “the truly important questions—namely, how we should live, and what the will of Heaven is—can be answered only by going beyond rational argumentation to a sagely understanding” (216). Thus the enterprise of Sima Qian’s hermeneutics of history concerns wisdom, to be acquired through “a flexible moral understanding based on a wide range of historical precedents” (202).

At a good number of junctures, Hardy provides insightful comparison between Sima Qian and other historical traditions, primarily classical Western, concluding that

they each created new modes of presenting information about the past; they organized and edited their data in meaningful ways; they wrestled with evidence and chronologies; they wrote aesthetically pleasing narratives, they honored some historical figures and disparaged others; and in general they transmitted their own moral insights. But in addition, Sima Qian . . . assumed that historians have a cosmological function and he consequently constructed a history that operates as a model of the world. (214)

This may be because “Sima believed that there were moral patterns embedded in the working of the cosmos and that a truly accurate history would reveal them” (59). In the end, then, “the *Shiji* is a hermeneutical tool, not an encoding device. . . . Historical knowledge was a skill, rather than a set of propositions” (140). Thus, in order to gain historical understanding and moral wisdom through Sima Qian’s model of the world, one needs to be a discerning and critical reader, for “historical interpretation is intimately connected to literary criticism” (87).

According to Hardy, Sima Qian’s ideal reader is “someone who is appropriately moved by what he or she reads, someone who learns how to discern. . . . By encountering history, particularly as it is conveyed in the *Shiji*, it is possible to learn to become a sage. Sageliness is not a matter of memorizing a corpus of facts; it is reaching understanding” (206). The *Shi ji* calls for an interactive reading for two reasons. First, “reading the *Shiji* is like reading poetry, with metaphor as the dominant mode” (64); that is, it pretty much is up to the reader to discern the moral and historical correlation of discrete events. And second, the reader will need to bring to bear the skill of “identifying broader and more abstract categories to which events belong” (65); that is, there are significant correlations between the phenomena of the human and natural worlds: “Everything in the *Shiji* is at least potentially connected—if not by direct historical causation, then by the resonances that infuse all the cosmos” (113). This would seem to imply that at a certain level reading and comprehending the import of the *Shi ji* is a sort of insider’s game: one needs the full backgrounding of textual, social, political, philosophical, historical, and literary contexts in order to grasp the greatness of Sima Qian’s enterprise. But there is much to be gained in reading the *Shi ji* on any level, for it is replete with the substance of early Chinese civilization, much of which still resonates today, and includes a great amount of information on most any topic; and, truth be told, it tells many a good tale. In Hardy’s words, Sima Qian “was a fine storyteller, an innovator, and a compassionate observer of human behavior” (28).

Structurally, the *Shi ji* is comprised of five major sections: basic annals (chaps. 1–12), chronological tables (chaps. 13–22), treatises (chaps. 23–30), hereditary houses (chaps. 31–60), and categorized biographies (chaps.

61–130). Readers of *Biography* may appreciate the fact that people thus constitute the major portion of Sima Qian's history—more than 4,000 of them are mentioned by name. In fact, Hardy tells us, “it is clear that Sima Qian saw the decisions and actions of individuals as the primary driving force of history” (88). The *Shi ji* treats a broad range of individuals in such a way that “we can come to actually know individuals from the past rather than merely knowing about them” (209). In terms of the consecution of events, “Carefully dated events extend over a period of about 750 years, and Sima offered as much reliable information as he could about the preceding two millennia. From 841 B.C.E. on, each year is represented in order in at least one chronological table” (42). Thus we see that Sima Qian paid dear attention also to the historical ordering of events and actions. In his analysis Hardy discusses a host of events, identifies five categories for determining the significance of actions (89–93) and twelve ways in which Sima Qian signals the significance of his material (130–35), and points to various techniques at work within the *Shi ji*, both in terms of “Sima Qian's more obvious methods of interpreting and fashioning his data,” and “the more sustained and literary shaping of his narrative.” The latter include selection, juxtaposition, repetition, parallels and contrasts, and contextualization. Hardy is careful to provide examples to support his suppositions, and his analysis of material related in the *Shi ji* is invariably cogent.

There is much more one could say about about *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo*, and I have pages and pages of notes, quotes, queries, and differences. Hardy has given the *Shi ji* a very close reading, and in his book he effectively discusses a good number of particular individuals and events, and greatly clarifies the function of and data comprised in the chronological tables. In this review I have dwelled mainly on matters that may be pertinent to readers of this journal. As for particulars about the scholarly apparatus, the character list is sufficient (Chinese characters do not appear in the text, but they are included in the bibliography); the index is satisfactory, although not extensive (excepting the entries under “Shiji” and “Sima Qian”); and the bibliography is pretty much up to date, although by no means exhaustive and all but limited to works in English and Chinese. There is much *Shi ji* scholarship in other languages, but the eleven page bibliography contains only one work in Japanese—excluding Takigawa's standard edition of the *Shi ji* from the thirties, with comments written in classical Chinese—and a single work in French, the groundbreaking and still monumental partial translation by Chavannes, from the turn of the last century. The endnotes are ample, and are replete with information; but I cannot pardon the publisher for omitting in this section at least a header with page references to guide the reader. The reader will need to keep a running bookmark in the note pages—and may become frustrated when not reading the book in its

order—or be forced to leaf back and forth among the pages for the correct chapter and note.

Hardy's book is ambitious, but it also is carefully argued with a clear rhetorical trajectory, and it is well documented. Readers may not be convinced in every instance, and perhaps not all will be persuaded by Hardy's conclusions about the broader significance of the *Shi ji* or even Sima Qian's design. Hardy himself clearly states at the outset that "At this late date, conclusive proof of Sima Qian's intentions is beyond our reach, but I will be quite satisfied if my imaginative reconstruction of his project is judged to be both plausible and useful" (xviii). This reader, for one, found much of interest in the book. But even in disagreement readers surely will be elevated to a vastly greater understanding—and appreciation—of one of the world's greatest writings. Hardy concludes his study by saying that the *Shi ji* "is germane to all kinds of new situations, new reconstructions of the past, and new theories of historiography. It remains a living work despite the vicissitudes of time" (218). As for the individual responsible for such a work, "Sima Qian has conquered the nearly inevitable ravages of history; that is, he has secured for himself a perpetual place in histories that will be conceived and written for ten thousand generations to come" (212). Thus is the enduring legacy of a man who was condemned to death (unjustly in the view of many) for speaking what he believed, who chose instead a painful, demeaning, and immutable punishment in order to complete his life's work. Sima Qian may have been humbled in life, but he has left a singular monument to his view of the world. Or in his own words, translated by Burton Watson and quoted twice by Hardy,

I have gathered together the old traditions of the world which were neglected and lost, and investigated their deeds and affairs. I have searched into the principles behind their successes and failures, their rises and declines, [making] in all, 130 chapters. In addition I wished to study the relationship of Heaven and man, and to penetrate changes both ancient and modern, thus completing the discourse of a single school. (24, 95)

Alan Berkowitz

NOTES

1. Hardy romanizes the title as *Shiji*, and understands it to mean *Records of the Scribes*; see 220 n. 8 for why.
2. Translated by James R. Hightower, and quoted by Hardy on page 24; cf. Burton Watson's translation of the same passage, quoted on page 118.
3. See also the discussions on 126 and 162–68.