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REVIEW

Stephen Durrant, Wai-yee Li, Michael Nylan, and Hans van Ess, *The Letter to Ren An and Sima Qian's Legacy*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016.

Reviewed by
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The Letter to Ren An and Sima Qian's Legacy is a collaboration by four well-known scholars, Stephen Durrant, Hans van Ess, Michael Nylan, and Li Wai-yee. This book-length study focuses on a single letter, "The Letter in Reply to Ren An" (henceforth "the Letter"), attributed to the Han historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (?145–?86 B.C.E.).

One strength of this book is that Li Wai-yee helpfully places the letter in the long tradition of Chinese literature. Comparing lists of suffering and misunderstood authors found in the Letter and the "Self-Narration" in *Shi ji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*),[1] she asserts that the former defines authorship through personal adversity, which confirms "the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic authority of the author" (p. 97).[2] Tracing connections between the Letter and other works illustrates the vindication of frustrated authorial voices in literary production. The book also serves as a good synthesis of related previous scholarship and historical background, touching on issues, such as the Letter's date, authenticity, the envisioned readers, and its editing and transmission after Sima Qian's death, including the possibility that it was written by Sima's grandson Yang Yun 楊惲 (?–54 B.C.E.).

Nonetheless, hovering over all such discourse is Sima Qian's notorious castration, which is discussed in the Letter and recognized by most traditional scholarship as one of his primary motivations. The book confines itself to certain themes such as the deathbed scene of Sima Tan 司馬談 (Qian's father, ?165–110 B.C.E.), the dialogue between Sima Qian

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1. Chapter 130 of *Shi ji*, entitled *zixu* 自序. The authors refer to it as the "Personal Narration."

2. The Letter does not appear in the *Shi ji* 史記. The two main texts that include it are the *Han shu* 漢書, "The Biography of Sima Qian" 司馬遷傳 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1962), 62. 2725–36, and *Wen xuan* 文選 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1977), 41.1854–66.

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and Hu Sui 壺遂, the trauma of Sima Qian's castration, and the ultimate goal of his project, as found either in the Letter, the "Self-Narration," or both. This method of reading *Shi ji* against Sima Qian's life experiences is called "lyric/romantic or autobiographical" (p. 30) by Durrant but is actually applied in this book by all the contributors. It aims to ascertain Sima Qian's thoughts and emotions from his biographical experiences as sketched in the Letter, the "Self-Narration" (and other texts), and deploy them to understand his writing.

However, this approach succumbs to a version of the intentional fallacy; it over-simplifies the complex relationship among the author, text, and reader by equating the author's intention with the meaning of the text, and assumes that readers can perceive such intentions precisely. The interpretive process is far more complicated than that. When we read a text, its words have meanings distinct from its specific instantiation in the author's mind. In this sense, the book helps to explore the historical context of the court and point out likely connections among historical events in Sima Qian's life, but meanwhile, we should be aware that this is only one of many possible perspectives.[3]

Another problem with this approach is that it overlooks the participation of readers in the interpretive process. Once a work is finished, it no longer belongs to the author but moves to the public domain. Even if an author's intention is clearly stated in his text, a reader's interpretation does not have to match it. Indeed, the same reader may react differently to the same work at different stages of life. As early as 1946, William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley pointed out the problems that result from reading an author's intention into his work.[4] Although they were addressing poetry rather than prose, what they had to say is applicable to the *Shi ji*. David Weberman summarizes Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1900–2002) hermeneutic view: "our understanding or interpretation of objects and events is always conditioned or shaped by our historical situation in a way not fully transparent to us and that this circumstance does not so much impede as enable knowledge and experience."[5]

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3. I have discussed the problem of the intentional fallacy in *Shi ji* studies and proposed to read *Shi ji* from a narratological perspective in my dissertation, "Building Blocks of Chinese Historiography: A Narratological Analysis of *Shi ji*" (Ph.D. diss. University of Pennsylvania, 2016).

4. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

5. Gadamer discusses how readers interpret texts in *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989). The quotation is from David Weberman's article "Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Question of Authorial Intention," in *The Death and Resurrection of the Author*, ed. William Irwin (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 45–46.

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Because of the complexity of the interpretative process, the mode of intentionalist inquiry has aroused enormous disagreement and debate for centuries in *Shi ji* studies.[6] This autobiographical approach relies on several problematic premises—for example, that the Letter, "Self-Narration," and other chapters in the *Shi ji* were written by Sima Qian himself rather than his father or later writers. Even less defensible is the assumption that these texts disclose Sima Qian's emotions and intentions, in other words, that we are capable of extracting his subtle messages from these writings and should then use it as a tool for understanding the book.

These premises raise several problems. First, Durrant's argument is circular and self-contradictory. On the one hand, he acknowledges that the authenticity of the letter is uncertain and recognizes that it may have been written by Yang Yun. On the other hand, he claims that, as long as it embodies or is consistent with Sima Qian's emotions and mind as revealed in *Shi ji*, it remains useful as a hermeneutic touchstone. He does not explain how we can be sure that our inferences about Sima Qian's emotions are accurate in the first place—but without such confidence, the danger is that we do little more than use the Letter to confirm our prejudices.

These premises also inform Hans Van Ess's attempt to date relevant events, as Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) and others have done.[7] Van Ess's chapter concludes that Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 C.E.) may have manipulated the Letter or even silently written part of it. However, this research does not clarify the intended recipient of the Letter or the effects of Sima Qian's castration on his conception of the *Shi ji* project.

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6. For example, Li Shaoyong 李少雍, *Sima Qian zhuanji wenxue lungao* 司馬遷傳記文學論稿 (Chongqing: Xinhua, 1987), 21, claims that Sima, like Confucius, intended to stimulate and satirize (*ciji* 刺譏). Likewise, Grant Hardy, *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), further claims that Sima was using Emperor Wu to criticize the past, particularly the First Emperor. Li Changzhi 李長之, *Sima Qian zhi renge yu fengge* 司馬遷之人格與風格 (Taibei: Kaiming, 1949), 369–77, contends that Sima actually used satires to embody his piercing insights into the Han society, especially towards Emperor Wu (157–87 B.C.E.). Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 62–65, argues that Sima Qian was and intended to be a second Confucius. Burton Watson's position stands somewhere between Li Shaoyong and Durrant. He believes that Sima Qian intended to show that his work is similar to and different from Confucius' work at the same time. See his *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 90.

7. Wang Guowei 王國維, "Taishigong xingnian kao" 太史公行年考, *Guantang jilin* 觀堂集林 (Taibei: Yiwen yinshu guan, 1956); Shi Ding 施丁, *Sima Qian xingnian xinkao* 司馬遷行年新考 (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin, 1995).

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Advancing conjectures inspired by supposedly suggestive wording in the text is another issue. For example, on the basis of Sima Qian's comments at the end of Wei Qing's 衛青 biography (*Shi ji*, chapter 111), Van Ess speculates that Sima Qian beseeched Wei Qing to set up a faction of worthy men, though Sima himself was unwilling to speak up for Ren An. In addition, Van Ess suggests that by inserting Sima's letter to Ren An in the biography of Sima Qian in *Han shu* 漢書 (*History of the Former Han*), Ban Gu may have wished to imply that Ren An was accusing Sima Qian of not promoting worthies and thereby not living up to his own standards, leading to the eradication of the Wei faction. We know nothing of the kind. Van Ess's interpretation is grounded solely on his psychological reading of both Sima Qian and Ban Gu, rather than textual evidence.

Likewise, Nylan misinterprets the relationship between Emperor Wu and Sima Qian, likening it to the "exemplary intimate friendship" (p. 86) between Yu Boya 俞伯牙 and Zhong Ziqi 鐘子期 (d. 299 B.C.E.). The famous trope of Boya and Ziqi's friendship is commonly used in early writings to highlight mutual understanding: when Boya plays music, Ziqi can perfectly picture high mountains or flowing water in the tone; after Ziqi's death, Boya breaks the strings and never plays again. Nylan uses this trope to contend that Sima Qian recklessly defended Li Ling 李陵 (?–74 B.C.E.) because "he had found a dear friend in the emperor himself" (p. 95). Li Wai-yee agrees with this argument. She and Nylan both cite as evidence the phrase *qiu qin mei* 求親媚 (seeking intimacy and ingratiating oneself),[8] as the Letter describes Sima's career before his castration.

Actually, this phrase commonly describes a ruler–minister relationship rather than an intimate friendship. Nylan does not distinguish friendship from two other important relationships: between a ruler and his minister, or similarly, a patron and his client, both of which emphasize mutual understanding and recognition. Before presenting the analogy of Boya and Ziqi, the narrator laments "(I) have no one to speak to" (*wu shui yu* 無誰語); after the analogy, he asks why Boya never plays again. Soon he offers an answer: "A gentleman will die for the one who recognizes his worth; a woman preens for the one who takes delight in her" (士為知己者死， 女為說己者容).[9] The Boya-Ziqi analogy does not indicate that Sima Qian and Emperor Wu interact as anything more than ruler and minister. The phrase *wu shui yu* is also used in two poems in

8. My translation. Nylan's is "sought, *like a seductive woman*," (75).

9. My translation.

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Chu Ci 楚辭 (*Songs of Chu*).[10] The same and similar phrases appear in biographies of Qu Yuan 屈原 and Jia Yi 賈誼 in the *Shi ji* and *Han shu*.[11] These stories are all about loyal ministers' frustration that the ruler does not heed or understand them. The proverb about gentlemen and women is also used to describe the relationship between a patron and his client in the "Biographies of Assassins" in the *Shi ji*.[12]

Van Ess perceives that the analogy of Boya and Ziqi refers to a relationship between a ruler and subject; accordingly, he argues that Sima Qian kept silent after his castration just as Ziqi stopped playing music. But in my view, he goes too far in forcing a direct analogy between Boya and Ziqi on the one hand, and Sima Qian and some specific historical personage on the other, suggesting that "more likely the emperor himself or the heir apparent is implied" (p. 60).

In sum, this book presents one hermeneutic perspective on *Shi ji*. Focusing exclusively on the author's emotions, it falls prey to the intentional fallacy, blocks other interpretive possibilities, and overlooks the complexity of both *Shi ji* and the interpretive process in general. The book claims to "address the larger question of how the Letter shapes our reading of *Shiji*" (p. 15); however, the book exemplifies how inordinate focus on the Letter limits rather than enriches our interpretations of *Shi ji*.

10. The two poems are "Yuan You" 遠遊 (Far-off Journey) and "Qi Jian" 七諫 (Seven Remonstrances). The former is attributed to Qu Yuan, the latter to Dongfang Shuo 東方朔. But all these examples show that this phrase is commonly used when discussing ruler–minister relationships in Han texts.

11. See *Shi ji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959), 84. 2494. *Han shu*, 48. 2224.

12. *Shi ji* 86. 2519.

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