


BOOK REVIEW

A Journal of My Misgivings: Liang Yusheng, Sima Qian, and the History of Qin

By Jeffrey Riegel, Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, China Research Monograph 79, 2023. Pp. xvi + 559; \$39.95 paperback.

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Since the early twentieth century, evidential learning (考證學/考據學 *kaozhengxue* or *kaojüxue*) in the High Qing has inspired a wealth of scholarship both in and outside China. Not only have there been monographic studies of its luminaries such as Qian Daxin, Dai Zhen, and Zhao Yi, but there have also been comprehensive analyses of evidential learning as an intellectual school and its scholarly contribution. Yu Ying-shih's study of Dai Zhen and Zhang Xuecheng and Ori Sela's work on Qian Daxin are examples of the former, while Benjamin Elman and Hamaguchi Fujio offer their insights on the latter, along with a host of Chinese works.¹

Jeffrey Riegel, who established his career at both Berkeley and Sidney, takes a distinctly different approach from these works. First, the subject of this detailed study is Liang Yusheng (1745–1819), a figure relatively unknown in current Qing intellectual history scholarship. Second, Riegel's study of Liang, it seems to me, mimics the method of Qing evidential scholars - rather than offering his direct analysis of Liang's career and scholarship, as Li Shuyan does in her 2022 biography of Liang Yusheng published in China,² Riegel chooses to offer his critique of Liang's critique of Sima Qian; that is, he comments on Liang Yusheng's comments on Sima's *Shiji* (History of the Grand Historian). Third, Riegel focussed on Liang's comments on Sima's writing of the history of the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), which is just a small part of Liang's much more comprehensive study of the *Shiji*, entitled *Shiji zhiyi*,

¹Yu Ying-shih 余英時, *Lun Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng: Qingdai zhongqi xueshu sixiangshi yanjiu* (論戴震與章學誠：清代中期學術思想史研究 On Dai Zhen and Zhang Xuecheng: a study of mid-Qing intellectual history) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2000); Ori Sela, *China's Philological Turn: Scholars, Textualism, and the Dao in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 2001); Hamaguchi Fujio 濱口富士雄, *Shindai Kōkyogaku no shisōshiteki kenkyū* (清代考據學的思想史的研究 An intellectual historical study of Qing evidential learning) (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1994).

²Li Shuyan 李淑燕, *Liang Yusheng yanjiu* (梁玉繩研究 A study of Liang Yusheng) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2022).

whose title Riegel renders as *A Journal of My Misgivings*. In so doing, Riegel presents an example of Liang's scholarship that allows us to examine in depth both the successes and shortcomings of the works of Qing evidence scholars. Also, since his own comments on Liang inevitably draw on modern scholarship on Qin history, his study amounts to an exercise in both textual and historical criticism. By examining the historiography of the Qin dynasty, i.e., Sima Qian's portrayal of Qin and its reception from the subsequent ages through the Qing period, Riegel also enhances our knowledge of Qin history.

The above general observations are intended to jumpstart my review by providing a rudimentary framework for appreciating Riegel's research. In the following, I will turn to the book itself to illustrate and improve upon these general points. *A Journal of My Misgivings* consists of two parts. The first part presents Liang Yusheng's life and scholarship, followed by a description of the methods and sources he used to criticize the *Shiji*. And the second part, or its main body, turns to Liang's specific critique of the *Shiji*'s records of Qin history. In other words, if Riegel intends to imitate the way Qing evidential scholars conducted their research, he also begins with the chapter familiar to modern scholars that introduces the protagonist of the book to his readers. In recounting Liang's life, Riegel notes that due to Liang's animosity in his time, which was perhaps intentional on Liang's part—"self-imposed and purposeful" (p. 41), there is a grain of doubt as to whether Liang was an evidential scholar, even though his study of the *Shiji* was prefaced by Qian Daxin. Beyond the personal connection, Riegel points out that Liang's work "clearly resonates with the values and principles of his contemporaries who practiced the methodologies of 'evidence-based research'" (p. 47). He then moves on to detail Liang's methods and sources. In his study of the *Shiji*, Liang consulted a plethora of sources, including its various editions that had been passed on to him, together with the commentaries by his predecessors, relevant historical texts, and *biji* (occasional jottings) and miscellaneous notes. Drawing on his erudition, he compared these texts to confirm or correct Sima Qian's text, using the *kaoyi* 考異 method (lit. examining the differences). In the process, he also applied methods of philology and epigraphy. Moreover, Liang shared with his contemporaries a strong sense of skepticism toward earlier texts, a principal notion that drove Qing evidential research (pp. 50–122).

Considered by Riegel as one of the "five pillars" of Qing *Shiji* scholarship, along with the works of Wang Niansun, Qian Daxin, Wang Mingsheng, and Zhaoyi (pp. 31–32), Liang Yusheng's *Journal* contains a total of 6,700 critical comments on the *Shiji*, 914 of which are on Sima Qian's writing of Qin history (pp. 69–70). The sample thus is relatively small. But without question, Qin history in Sima Qian's writing is an important part, similar, perhaps, to Herodotus' writing on the Persian War in his *Histories*. In the second part of the book, Riegel discusses Liang Yusheng's critique of Sima's writing of Qin in four chapters: "The Founders of the Qin Ruling Lineage and Their Heirs," "Kings and Emperors," "The Cultural and Administrative Geography of Qin," and "Warfare." Riegel points out that since Liang's research on the *Shiji* relied mostly on the comparative method of evaluating the accuracy of Sima's writing against other sources, "Liang's *Journal* is primarily a critique of the historiography of the *Shiji*, not a study of the history of early China." But, he quickly adds, the veracity or historicity of the *Shiji* remains a major motivating issue for Liang, as he is primarily concerned with questions such as "how accurately are events portrayed in the *Shiji*?" (p. 124). Therefore, Liang's textual criticism enables the reader to gain a better knowledge of what happened in the Qin period.

Out of his strong interest in verifying the accuracy of the names and their order (family and first name), Liang discovered several errors in the *Shiji*. Comparing the story of Baili Xi with that in the *Zuozhuan*, for example, Liang believed that Sima Qian confused Baili Xi with someone else in his “Qin Basic Annals” (pp. 169–175). Liang also argued that the given name of the First Emperor of Qin, Zheng, could be written either as 正 or 政, because the two graphs were, in Riegel’s translation of Liang’s words, “from very early times, freely substituted for one another” (pp. 245). The fastidiousness of Liang’s scrutiny of the *Shiji*’s accuracy is nowhere more evident than in his criticism of the famous tales Sima Qian tells in his all-encompassing text, such as those about would-be assassin Jing Ke, political counselor Su Qin and his rival Zhang Yi, and the merchant-turned-politician Lü Buwei. In fact, as Riegel points out, Liang’s concern for historical accuracy was so great that he wished Sima Qian had included no speeches, conversations, memorial, letters, or private exchanges. However, Riegel believes that Liang may have gone a bit too far in “pursuing narrower concerns in the received text” (p. 198); Sima’s writing on Jing Ke, for instance, “proved to be a fountainhead for such literature because its origins were essentially literary, rather than historical, in nature” (p. 293).

As mentioned above, in composing his *Journal*, Liang Yusheng consulted almost the entire corpus of previous commentaries on the *Shiji*; his own research thus showcases the historiography of Sima Qian’s magnum opus from just after the fall of Han all the way up to the early nineteenth century. In working on “Cultural and Administrative Geography of Qin” and “Warfare,” Liang demonstrated this historiography most comprehensively, simply because his predecessors had also shown great interest in these subjects. In his comments on Liang’s work, Riegel has the advantage of including works written after Liang, such as those by Wang Guowei and Meng Wentong, who were able to consult modern archaeological findings. Riegel does give Liang due credit for his use of epigraphic sources regarding Qin Shi Huang’s tour of the country (p. 365). Finally, Liang’s care in examining the place and time of the battles fought by Qin in its conquest greatly improved upon Sima Qian’s knowledge of the feat Qin Shi Huang had accomplished in leading to China’s first unification.

There is, however, another side to Liang’s work on the *Shiji*, as Riegel judiciously reminds us. While his critique builds on the earlier tradition in the study of Sima Qian, Liang’s approach is “anachronistic” in that the “historiographical concepts and values” he adopts are “alien” to the Han historian because they emerged later (p. 68). This reminder, it seems to me, is what ultimately distinguishes Riegel’s work from Liang’s. Having devoted decades to Liang Yusheng, Riegel, in compiling this large and densely written volume, intimately recreates the practice of a Qing evidence scholar. But in the end, his reenactment is not a simple replica, but a close-up case study of Qing scholarship—one that not only reconstructs its content, but also reveals the context in which it was created and situated. As a result, Riegel makes a unique and valuable contribution to the field of Qing intellectual history in any language.