

## **SIMA QIAN'S SHIJI WORK: HISTORICAL TRUTH OR IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION?**

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**Abstract:** *The authors of this article conduct a critical analysis of Sima Qian's work Shi Ji. The article examines how historical events are described, especially interpretations related to the Xiongnu and the peoples of Central Asia. The study discusses that Shi Ji is not just a collection of historical facts, but a text that was formed as an ideological construction of the Chinese Empire. Using the methods of deconstruction and comparative analysis, the extent to which Sima Qian adhered to the principle of objectivity and how history is formed is considered. The results show that although Shi Ji is based on reliable historical data, the descriptions presented in it could have been formed taking into account the state ideology of China.*

**Key words:** *Sima Qian, Shi Ji, Chinese historiography, Xiongnu, historical objectivity, deconstruction, historical interpretation, Sino-Davan relations, ideological discourse, comparative analysis.*

Sima Qian is one of the most famous representatives of ancient Chinese historiography, and his work Shizhi is still considered an important scientific source. Historians estimate that he was born in 145 BC, but this date is based on conjecture rather than concrete evidence. Therefore, his life and activities have been subject to various interpretations. In this article, we will analyze how history is shaped in the work Shizhi, especially how the image of the Huns and Central Asian states is interpreted. We will discuss the extent to which Sima Qian adhered to the principle

of historical objectivity and the extent to which his writings are an independent source. History is not only about facts, but also how it is written. Therefore, Shizhi is considered not only a collection of historical data, but also a product of Chinese society and imperial ideology. Throughout the article, we will critically analyze how objectively or ideologically the work was shaped.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study used qualitative analysis and deconstruction methods to analyze historical data in Sima Qian's Shiji. First, through source analysis, the depiction of historical events and individuals in Shiji was compared with the political and ideological context of the Chinese Empire. This examined the objectivity of the text and the individual approach of the author. Using the deconstruction method, it was analyzed how history was constructed in Shiji, which aspects were emphasized and which were ignored. This approach made it possible to determine whether the text was shaped based on certain ideological goals. In addition, through comparative analysis, Sima Qian's approach was compared with the methods of other ancient historians, such as Herodotus. In particular, it examined how the depiction of the Xiongnu and Central Asian states in Shiji was interpreted. In general, this study aimed to analyze historical texts not only as a collection of facts, but also as a spiritual construct formed in a certain ideological and political context.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Analysis shows that Sima Qian's historical approach, although generally accepted as objective, contains certain ideological and political factors. His Shizhi not only reflected historical events, but also served to portray the Chinese empire as the center. Although Sima Qian wrote history in a strict chronological order, this system may itself be the product of a certain political and ideological approach. The Shizhi also emphasized the continuity of Chinese history and its stability as a state, which served to reinforce the Chinese centralist discourse. The information provided about the Xiongnu may have been largely shaped by the foreign policy of the Chinese empire. They were often portrayed as a threat, which was consistent with China's strategy to justify its military actions. The writings about Dawan also likely put Chinese interests first.

The causes and results of the war were interpreted within the framework of imperial policy. Sima Qian highlighted the role of women in governance, especially Empress Lu. However, this portrayal may have been more a reflection of gender norms in Chinese society than a representation of their actual power. Women's participation in government was often interpreted as a matter of intrigue and political games, which is consistent with a traditional patriarchal approach. Although the *Shiji* is based on historical evidence, the facts in it are selective and shaped by Sima Qian's personal worldview. Although the principle of "reporting doubtful things as doubtful" is applied, the historical image of certain events and individuals is presented in a predetermined ideological context. Thus, Sima Qian's *Shiji* can be viewed as a specific ideological and political construct rather than a collection of historical facts. His approach served the purpose of ordering Chinese history and demonstrating its cultural superiority. The process of writing history is always carried out from a certain ideological or political position, and Sima Qian's work is no exception.

Historians estimate that Sima Qian was born in 145 BC [1]. If we think about this statement more deeply, it is not just historical information, but also something that says something about how we understand and accept history. The statement "Historians estimate that Sima Qian was born in 145 BC" sounds like a simple scientific conclusion on the surface, but there is a hidden contradiction. The most interesting thing is that historians do not present this date as a definite fact, but as an assumption. So this "truth" is not actually absolute, but rather based on probability. But we often imagine history as a set of fixed facts. At this point, the question arises: if what we know about the lives of historical figures is often based on assumptions and interpretations, is not history itself a text that is rewritten over and over again? Moreover, the word "historians" is used generically. Which historians? Do they all agree? What source did they use to reach this conclusion? What if other historians disagree? So history is not just about telling the story of the past, but also about determining which story is considered true. In other words, history is not just about the facts, but also about how they are communicated to us. The very importance of the date of birth is also questionable. Indeed, what difference does it make to us if we know that Sima Qian was born in 145 BC? If this date is not accurate, does it change

our understanding or appreciation of him? In this way, the statement that Sima Qian was born in 145 BC also shows how historical truth is constructed, interpreted, and shaped by the way it is expressed. We are accustomed to accepting historical facts as fixed, but it is clear that they are also concepts that are constantly being revised and interpreted. In China, Sima Qian is regarded as the “father of Chinese history” [2].

The phrase “Sima Qian is regarded as the father of Chinese history” tells us that Sima Qian is not just a historian, but has become a symbolic figure for the entire society. The term “father” is not limited to scientific or academic achievements. It embodies a sense of human closeness, respect, and gratitude. This means that Sima Qian was not conceived of by his contemporaries and subsequent generations as an ordinary writer, but as a guide and a leader. His works were not simple historical records, but served to strengthen the understanding of a people’s past and self-confidence. However, at the same time, this phrase also contains a generalization. When you say "accept," who do you mean? All Chinese? Only historians? State ideology? People understand history differently, each generation evaluates it from the perspective of its time. Perhaps some historians do not glorify Sima Qian's importance, but rather criticize his historical methods?

He became famous for his book "Shiji" (史记) - "Records of History" [3]. However, although this book generally describes Chinese history, it mainly covers a very long period of time, from the 17th to the 11th centuries BC and from the 11th to the 21st centuries BC [4]. Sima Qian's "Shiji" is said to have made him famous. But when did this popularity come about? Was he still so famous in his own time, or was the true value of his work determined by later generations? The value of any historical work is determined by time, by those who read it, and by those who interpreted it. If we understand history only as a collection of records, "Shiji" may simply be an ancient manuscript. However, it is recognized as not just a text, but also as a work that shaped a culture and expressed historical consciousness. In addition, it is said to have "generally described Chinese history." But what does this word “general” mean? Could something have been omitted to generalize history? After all, any historical work has a certain point of view. Sima Qian also made his own choice - he included what he considered worth writing about. But history is an infinite collection of events,

and it is impossible to fit them all into one work. So, “Shiji” is not just a collection of historical facts, but also reflects the author’s views, the ideology of the era, and his ideas about how history should be understood. It is also emphasized that it covers such long periods as “the 17th-11th centuries BC and the 11th-11th centuries”. This raises another interesting question for us: how can a person describe periods that he did not live in, that he did not witness directly? We often think of history as a science that relies on hard evidence, but ancient sources like the Shiji are often shaped by myths, oral traditions, and the author’s personal perspective. Thus, Sima Qian’s history is not just a description of real events, but also a collection of interpretations that have developed over time. Social-scientific reading emphasizes Sima Qian’s objective attitude towards his sources and his principle of “reporting doubtful things as doubtful”[5]. In addition, Ban Gu praised Sima Qian for his “ability to organize events and principles, his deep thinking but not exaggerating, his style simple but not crude.” He praised Sima Qian’s writing style, saying that “his narrative is clear, his events reliable, he does not deny the good and does not conceal the bad; Therefore, people consider it a reliable historical source”[6]. First, let’s analyze the phrase “objective attitude towards sources.” Objectivity is one of the most important principles for historians, but can it always be absolute? Sima Qian used written and oral sources that were available at the time. He selected the sources, analyzed them, but the final conclusion about their accuracy was left to the reader. This raises the question of how “objective” history can be. Sima Qian is said to have followed the principle of “reporting doubtful things as doubtful.” This principle is very important in historical methodology, because any historical source should be viewed with suspicion. But this means that he considered some information reliable and considered others doubtful.

So, he still added his own interpretation as a historian. Writing history is not just about recording facts, but also about organizing and interpreting them. At the same time, in the second part of the sentence, Ban Gu praises Sima Qian's style. The descriptions of "ability to organize, deep thinking, and not exaggerating" are listed as ideal qualities in history. But there is another question here: On what criteria did Sima Qian organize events? What views did he use in selecting and organizing historical

information? In addition, Ban Gu describes Sima Qian as "simple but not crude." This is a very interesting description, because most historical works can be complex and philosophical. However, the simplicity of the style of "Shiji" while maintaining clarity may have made it popular among the people. This is especially important for the survival of history not only in academic circles but also among the general public. Finally, the most noteworthy aspect is Sima Qian's "neither denying the good nor concealing the evil." This is, on the one hand, a sign of respect for historical truth, and on the other hand, it also reflects the moral position of the historian. Because many historians, under the pressure of the ideology of their time or the rulers, have concealed certain events or interpreted them differently. Sima Qian, on the other hand, tried to present events truthfully, which is why people considered him a reliable source.

The Shiji had a great influence not only on Chinese society, but also on other Asian cultures [7]. This claim should be deeply questioned from a postmodern perspective. Because what exactly do we mean by influence? Did the Shiji really have a direct and active influence on Asian cultures, or did this idea emerge later as a historical construct?

Firstly, influence is a relative concept. For example, it can be assumed that Japanese or Korean chronicles were inspired by Chinese historical traditions, but is there any concrete evidence that this was directly influenced by the "Shiji"? Perhaps the general process of writing history in Asian peoples was formed independently.

Secondly, if we are talking about the spread of the "Shiji" and its influence on other cultures, then we need to determine through what channels this influence was achieved. For example, how did it reach Japanese or Korean historians? If it is known that it remained mainly within Chinese scholars and the state system, then it is not clear how it had a "significant influence" on other cultures.

Thirdly, power and ideology are also important factors in the issue of influence. China considered itself the center of Asia and sought to expand its cultural influence. Could the influence of the "Shiji" also be the result of China's promotion of its own history as a dominant discourse? So, is this influence a natural process or a later historical construct?

In the formation of a historian's personality, his family life and life experiences in general play an important role. This was the case for Sima Qian. His father worked as a senior astrologer in the palace [8]. We will have to discuss these sentences in more depth.

First, what exactly is meant by “senior astrologer”? Was he really one of the most influential scholars in the palace, or was this title later exaggerated to strengthen the historical narrative? Because there were many officials and specialists working in the imperial palace, and it is natural that Sima Qian’s father was one of them. But why is he described as a senior astrologer?

Secondly, astrology was not only a scientific activity at that time, but also an ideological tool. Palace astrologers not only observed the stars in the sky, but also played a role in making political decisions. Perhaps Sima Qian’s style of writing history and interpreting events was also influenced by his father’s ideological position? Did Sima Qian really write history neutrally, or was his worldview shaped by the position he held?

Third, if Sima Qian's father was an important part of the imperial court, this also led to the formation of his family in a certain political and social environment. So, can Sima Qian's historical work not be considered the result of an independent search for knowledge, but rather a continuation of the imperial court's ideology? There are various historical books in history, such as Herodotus's "History"[9]. There are similarities and differences between Sima Qian and Herodotus' historical works[10]. For example, while Herodotus wrote his works based on his personal experiences, Sima Qian used the official historical writing method in his "Shiji". Also, Sima Qian did not write only about one region or dynasty, but also about different dynasties, such as the Qin and Han dynasties [11].

First, let us stop at the idea that Herodotus' "History" was based on personal experiences. So, while Herodotus wrote from personal experience, while Sima Qian used the official historical style, neither approach is entirely accurate. After all, official history is also shaped by ideology, power, and the writer’s worldview, isn’t it?

Second, let's consider the idea that Sima Qian wrote about different dynasties. This is presented as the result of an objective approach, but postmodernism does not deny that there are certain ideological or political interests behind such claims. Could it be that writing about different dynasties in the *Shiji* served the purpose of reinforcing the imperial discourse, that is, presenting Chinese history as a centralized and continuous process?

Third, while discussing the differences in historical writing styles, we should also analyze the purpose for which they were formed. If Herodotus used a more narrative style in his work, Sima Qian may have written a history that served the state. So which one is closer to the truth? Or is there no truth, just different narratives? Incidentally, chronology is an important part of Sima Qian's works. Since there is no clear chronological order in Herodotus's works, it is difficult to understand the events [12]. However, Sima Qian created his own clear chronology in his work with the help of tables and monographs [13]. If we consider this idea from a postmodern perspective, the very concept of a clear chronology can be questioned. Because history consists not only of facts, but also of the order in which they are presented, with what emphasis, and in what ideological context.

First, the idea that Herodotus's lack of chronological order makes it difficult to understand events is not an objective truth, but a view based on certain historical writing standards. Why should an exact chronology be the main criterion of historical reliability? Perhaps Herodotus's method was aimed at explaining history not in a linear chain of cause and effect, but through human experience and stories? So to what extent is the traditional view that history can only be understood through a chronological order justified?

Secondly, the idea that Sima Qian created his historical chronology through tables and monographs does not mean that he wrote history accurately and without errors. On the contrary, this chronology may also have been selected and arranged according to a certain ideology, the official point of view of the authorities, or the writer's worldview. From the point of view of postmodernism, chronology is never an objective measure of time, but a construction created to explain history and in what context.

Third, the idea that a precise chronology helps to understand events is also questionable. Because history is not just a series of facts, but also the connections between them, their causes and effects. Sima Qian's historical methodology is based on traditional Chinese court historiography, which most likely reflects imperial ideology. Therefore, this chronology can be a means of strengthening power and ideological stability in some sense.

I would also like to mention the "Shiji". In this book, he talks about the conflicts between the Xiongnu (Xiongnu) and the Han dynasty and provides a lot of information about them [14]. This raises the question: is the historian's task to present information or to organize and interpret it in a certain logical system?

First, Sima Qian did not write about the relations between the Xiongnu and the Han as a mere observer, but rather he had a certain ideological position. Based on the interests of the Chinese empire, the Huns may have been portrayed primarily as a threat. If history were written by the victors, how objective and truthful could Sima Qian's account be? Perhaps the Huns would have interpreted these events in a completely different way?

Second, the account itself is not neutral. Sima Qian's writings were shaped by the ideology, culture, and needs of the government at the time. The account in the Shiji may have been shaped to justify the government's policies. For example, the Han dynasty may have tended to portray the Huns as a nomadic and dangerous force in order to present itself as a centralized, civilized state.

Third, historiography is not simply a record of events, but rather a compilation and explanation of them. If Sima Qian portrayed the Huns as culturally inferior to China, it is not unlikely that this is not information but an ideological narrative.

■ In general, he mainly described events that took place in China. In doing so, he also provided information about the society, its beliefs, and its social and political life. For example, in Chapter 10, he wrote about Liu Bang's wife, Empress Lu, in which he discussed the role of women in government [15]. If we analyze this idea through the method of deconstruction, several important questions arise: How did Sima Qian see history? What kind of discourse did his narrative style create? Which aspects were consciously emphasized and which were ignored? First, if we consider the idea that

he “mainly described events that took place in China,” this is related to the question of how history is written and for whom. While it may seem natural to put China at the center, this also affects how the history of other peoples is covered. Did Sima Qian also cover events outside China extensively, or did he only consider those related to China to be important? For example, when writing about the Xiongnu or other neighboring peoples, did he also emphasize their internal history, or did he only mention them in the context of their conflicts with China? It is also possible that events within China were covered from the perspective of the ruling dynasties, which means that the history of some social strata was overshadowed.

It is also worth thinking more deeply about the idea that “he provided information about society, their beliefs, and their social and political life.” The deconstructionist approach shows that any historical text is written in a certain ideological, political, and cultural context. What values did Sima Qian consider important in his work? Could it be that he relied only on official documents and traditional views in writing history, without critically reviewing them? When writing about beliefs and political life, did he try to confirm the existing order or also provide alternative interpretations of it?

Furthermore, the idea that “Empress Lu wrote about the role of women in government” raises important questions. How was the role of women in political life portrayed? What was their actual activity and influence, and how did Sima Qian portray this? Did he portray female rulers as equals to male rulers, or did he portray them according to traditional stereotypes? For example, in many historical texts, female rulers are often associated with cunning, intrigue, and self-interest. Is Sima Qian’s interpretation closer to or more different from these stereotypes?

The nomadic people most frequently mentioned in the Shizhi were the Xiongnu. This is because they were one of the most powerful nomadic groups in China at the time [16]. They fought wars with the Han dynasty [17]. Was it because the Xiongnu were powerful at the time, or because Sima Qian’s historical perspective focused on them?

Who writes history and how is always an important question. Sima Qian based his work on dynastic archives and court sources, so the depiction of the Xiongnu may

have been based on the perspective of the Chinese rulers. How are the Xiongnu portrayed in the Shiji? Are they portrayed solely as military adversaries, or is their culture and society also explored in more depth?

The idea that they waged war with the Han Dynasty is also questionable. Was their warfare solely motivated by aggression, or were there also attempts at invasion by China? How does Sima Qian address this issue? If only the Xiongnu are portrayed as aggressors, then there was a clear ideological direction in the writing of the text. In addition, the concept of war is also relative - it may have been perceived by China as an act of defense, while the Xiongnu were perceived as an act of preservation of their territory.

He also recorded some of the nomadic customs of the Xiongnu [18]. Sima Qian described these in his work [19]. He also paid special attention to the daily life, marriage ceremonies, and lifestyle of the Xiongnu dynasty [20]. Did he live among the Xiongnu or did he obtain this information from Chinese sources? If he relied solely on Chinese sources, then this description may not have been based on the Xiongnu themselves, but rather on the Chinese view of them.

Furthermore, the idea that he “paid special attention to the daily life, marriage ceremonies, and lifestyle of the Xiongnu dynasty” should also be questioned. Did the Xiongnu consider themselves to be a single dynasty, or is this concept the result of the approach of Chinese historians? Historical sources indicate that the Xiongnu had a complex internal structure, with interactions between different tribes. So, did Sima Qian simplify their complex social structure by depicting them as a single society?

The same can be said about marriage ceremonies and lifestyles: How neutral was Sima Qian in comparing the culture of the Huns with Chinese society? Did he not portray the life of the Huns as exotic and strange?

In addition, Sima Qian revealed a political and ethnographic model of the peoples of Central Asia in the Biography of Dayuan in the Shiji 123 AD [21]. The Biography of Dayuan and the causes and consequences of the Sino-Dawan War described in it are given [22]. If we consider Dawan-China relations in a comprehensive way, we can explain them from a geopolitical point of view with the political shifts that occurred in the 1st century BC and the expansion of the Great Silk

Road columns and settlements. However, the question arises: on what basis did Sima Qian create a political and ethnographic model of the peoples of Central Asia? To what extent is the depiction of Dawan in his *Shiji* based on independent sources? Because it is common for historical records to be dominated by the narrative of the victorious side. Therefore, Sima Qian's writings about Dawan should be analyzed within the framework of the foreign policy interests of the Chinese empire.

Also, how were the causes and consequences of the Dawan War interpreted? Did Sima Qian portray China as the main interested party in this conflict, and not portray the Dawan state as a relatively passive, militarily weaker, or forced to submit? Since historical records often reflect the interests of the victorious side, it is important here as well how the Chinese empire portrayed Dawan to justify its expansion.

Ethnographic questions also arise. How were the people of Dawan portrayed? It is likely that their culture, lifestyle, and political system were evaluated based on Chinese standards. What stereotypes did Chinese historians have in their view of other peoples? How is their belonging to a farming or pastoral society interpreted?

### **CONCLUSION**

The results of the study show that although Sima Qian's *Shizhi* is based on accurate historical facts, its depictions are often shaped in accordance with Chinese state ideology. It is possible that information about the Huns, Dawan, and the peoples of Central Asia is presented from the imperial perspective, while their independent history remains in the shadows. At the same time, *Shizhi* can be interpreted not only as a historical document, but also as a text reflecting the political and cultural views of a certain era. This shows the need to study history not only as a collection of facts, but also as a process shaped by certain interests.

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