

# Ideology and Value Divergence: Assassins in Chinese Historiography

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## ABSTRACT

Study on different narratives between western and eastern historians have emphasized that due to ideological influences, individual in western or eastern culture has different patterns to getting oneself involved in political life. As an extreme political weapon for some specific goals, assassins played an important role in changing the situation for revenge and other radical operations. A case study focused on how value teachings produced assassins and political plots is an ideal demonstration to further develop the narrative studies between different cultures. This article examines the assassin case by using the text of Sima Qian's Grand Scribes of Records and related contexts. It is argued that the rewarding mechanism from the elites is the driving force for traditional Chinese plebeians to participate and practice their political crafts.

**Keywords:** Piety, Assassins, Sima Qian.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

We have noticed that in Eastern empires, especially in Chinese history, plebeians felt strange to the political society. It seems they never want to be bothered by political plots. But what finally happened in those statist empires that makes this "keep one's nose clean" pattern broke? And why there always exists someone who agreed to reward the elites even sacrificed one's own life? These questions require a comparative study between Chinese and classical western historiography [1].

To start it, we need to detect why they gradually fall into the political life where they treated as a harmful or, at least meaningless place. The core of the reason was the same (we will argue it later), but the real reasons for them were a little different. The reason to support their activity was they had been looked at highly by the elites on the one hand. On the other, they want to retreat from the elites. There has a consensus that different people have different interests. Thus they owed different obligations to the elites. It can be discovered that almost all of these assassins in Sima Qian's record share the same character. They were famous as they are both daring and strengthful [2, 3]. These assassins, plebeians,

though, were not mediocre. Their experiences make them been known to the elites. Also, their swordplay made the record been possible, for there is no chance for an elite to trust a weak and nobody to help them. Therefore, their skills make them been noticed by the elites, which was the beginning of the tales of assassins. For this reason, these assassins are the same. The methods of how the elites help them to fall into political life are quite different. The first man in the book was Ts'ao Mo. Before he became an assassin, he was a failed commander. According to Sima's record, Ts'ao Mo became a commander of the Lu state and fought with Ch'i state, but he retreated in defeat three times. Duke Chuang was afraid and offered the enemy territory to make peace with Ch'i, but he still kept Ts'ao Mo as commander. He wasn't treated as an assassin, but here a funny joint may impose him transferred as an assassin. When fought with Ch'i, he was not only defeated but also retreated. In the ancient empire, the retreat was a disgrace for a commander, for which his entire family should be punished. But Duke Chuang still kept Mo as his commander. When Duke Huan and Duke Chuang had finished swearing the oath on the altar mound, Ts'ao Mo held up a dagger and seized Duke Huan of Ch'i. To reward the Duke's generosity with forgiving his failures

and regain his grace, Mo took such actions. He seized the Duke Huan of Ch'i and imposed Duke Huan to return the territories they won from the war.

The second man was Chuan Chu. He was the only people that not chosen by the emperor directly. When Chuan Chu was recommended to the Noble Scion Kuang, Kuang treated him very nicely. After he had obtained [the services of] Chuan Chu, he treated him as a valued retainer. Chuan Chu wanted to make contributions, that's why he became minister Wu Tzu Hsiii's friend, and when he discovered Kuang could help him to achieve his goal, he agreed. For Chuan Chu, he might be shocked by Kuang's words like (Noble Scion Kuang struck his forehead against the ground and said My life is yours, sir.) The swearing like "My life is yours, sir" was abnormal from an elite to a plebeian, that words broke the feudal hierarchy. So was convinced Chuan Chu. That means Kuang treats him as his own family, but not as an employee. Besides, after Cuan Chu was dead, He appointed Chuan Chu's son as a Senior Excellency. We can argue there might have a bond between Cuan Chu and Kuang [4].

The same condition also happened to the assassin Ching K'o. Before K'o met Tan, the Heir of Yen, he had traveled to many places. Ching K'o was a native of Wey. His ancestors were natives of Ch'i. After moving to Wey, the natives of Wey referred to him as Excellency Ch'ing. When he went to Yen, the natives of Yen referred to him as Excellency Ching [4]. He loved reading and swordplay. He spoke on the arts of politics before Lord Yiian of Wey, but Lord Yiian failed to employ him. Later, Ch'in attacked Wei, established its Eastern Commanders', and moved the clansmen of Lord Yiian of Wey to Yeh-wang, the ancient Chinese dislike travel around the world. They tend to stay in one place forever. The leaving and traveling only take place if they were treated as nobody. After K'o begins his travel, he wanted to be respected as those celebrities. During his travels, Ching K'o once stopped in Yii-tz'u. He discussed swordsmanship with Kai Nieh. Ching K'o visited the city of Han-tan. Those celebrities treated him unfriendly. He sent a messenger to Ching K'o's host, but His Excellency Ching had already harnessed his horses and left Yii-tz'u. When the messenger returned to report, Kai Nieh said, "Of course he left. I stared him down. From these sentences, we can claim the swordplay of K'o was not convinced others who were masters in this field. These experiences heavily shocked K'o because he won't visit these celebrities anymore after he stayed in Yan. Just between these periods, Prince Dan found him and treat him as a master. The Heir knelt and bowed twice, raised on his haunches, and crawled forward on his knees, weeping until snivel ran from his nose. After Ching K'o was seated, the Heir moved off his mat and knocked his forehead against the ground [4]. These activities were usually used to the superior at that time, but Prince Dan showed it to a shocked man, a

plebeian with mediocre swordplay. Another very important record of Sima's record reads, He then made Excellency Ching K'o a Senior Excellency and lodged him in the upper lodge. The Heir appeared daily at his gate with the most honorable dishes, carriages, horses, and beautiful women, to meet his expectations [4]. After traveled many places, it was the first time K'o been treated with dignity. K'o ended his normal life and join in Dan's political schedule. K'o never reflects what he needs to do. He just followed Dan's awareness. The assassin Yii Jang also followed this doctrine, although his employer, the Earl of Chih, was killed by the Viscount Hsiang of Chao. Jang gained respect and honor from the Earl. After the Earl of Chih had been destroyed, his land was divided into three parts. Viscount Hsiang bore the most resentment against the Earl of Chih; he had his skull lacquered and used it as a drinking vessel. Bore the most resentment against the Earl of Chih; he had his skull lacquered and used it as a drinking vessel. Viscount Hsiang disgraced Jang's benefactor to replied the honor and respect from the Earl. Jang took part in political life and became an assassin for revenge. Also, the same experience happened to Nei Zheng [4].

As we conclude, we have detected these assassins all owe the obligation to the elite. And to reward it, they fall into political life. Nienhauser's comparative method still works as a clue [5, 6].

## **2. AN INFLUENTIAL MIRROR: SIMA AND HIS ACHIEVEMENT**

When searching for an empire or hoping to earn some lessons from the past, several efficient pieces of evidence can be concerned to approve our hypothesizes, historical books from the historians, excavations, even the oral expressions from the nearly last empire [6]. However, because of the ideological education and the interviewer's age, or some technique troubles, modern differences, the excavations and the oral interview in some aspects, may not the best options. Accordingly, the historical records from the historians might be a suitable choice to reflect the old empire like a mirror.

This essay will research the ancient Chinese empire. As we noticed, the Chinese empires, the Qin and the Han empire, normally first come into our mind. People always comment both of them as the pioneer of the Chinese imperial pattern, therefore debating why only the Chinese empire can exist for such a long period. How this successful element influenced our modern life, the Grand Scribes Records, from Sima Qian, serves the function of an elaborated mirror.

As we begin, the first resource to consider is the producer of the records. The author Sima Qian, or pronounced by Nienhauser, Ssu-ma Ch'ien, was an official historian born in the Han dynasty. He recorded

the history between the pre-historical emperor Huang Di and Wu Di's emperor in the Han dynasty. As he was a teenager, he traveled across many countries and speculated on the diversity of culture. This experience may have influenced him and helped him gather some historical materials, although some were not trustworthy. By the way, Sima, in his early time, gathered those stories by his interests. This is maybe similar to the western historians, such as Herodotus and Tacitus.

Besides, it is worthy of paying attention to Sima and his writing context. Sima wrote his history between Wudi's period, which was reckoned as an extraordinary but violent emperor. The admirable figure of his hegemony is widely accepted in many Chinese citizens' sights. They took Wudi as their idol, because he was the first man who improved a not extremely centralized ideology. In his period, the Han dynasty re-controlled the power of money building and the military. What's more, Wudi even set up only one ideology to authorize the teachings from Confucius. This ideology was mixed with other thinking, like the concept of the stable destiny from the Yin Yang school and the public control from the Law school. All these mixed, its aim was not to define the Confucian's thought, all these elements melted had rebuilt a new combination, and it aimed to maintain the stability [5, 7]. When we are looking up Sima's writing, we can notice that he may blame Wudi's violence, but he supported this centralized thinking powerfully in his deep heart. He even thought of another thinker Shang Yang as an excellent elite. All the citizens believe that the emperor was the son of God, and they all agreed with imperialism. Under such circumstances, Chinese citizens, like Sima himself, concluded their unhappiness resulted from their destinies. They all accepted this ideology, and they all afraid of been discarded from the political incarnation. Thus they only melted in it and gradually became who they don't want to be. After irrigating this ideology, people all agreed that they are normal, and they have nothing to do with the government. They won't protest the systems. They even agreed this system was reasonably controlling them when they were born. Chinese people were only concerned about their external profits, even now, hence, the Chinese empire was so stable, and horrible events happened, just because they never care about it. It is reasonable to compare Western empires like Rome and Persia, from Herodotus, Tacitus, and Ammianus Marcellinus. Persian empire used satraps to govern the local people. They allowed them to keep their culture. The Roman empire was operating as a committee and constructed many of the city-states. Everyone who wants to be a member of the Roman citizens could achieve their dream. By this pattern, we can find that Roman citizens, though controlled by imperialism, could still put their willingness to their choices. This was manifested in the

Western historians' books, like the critic from Tacitus to the Roman emperor and the advice from Herodotus to the Greece mode. At the end of this part, we can conclude that Sima lived in a centralized context, which might be why the Chinese imperial system cannot collapse. As for other Western citizens, their bodies were under control, but their thinking can enjoy liberty. Gradually, their estimation became a new thinking mode: the critical thinking often mentioned to be absent for Chinese lacked, even now.

For the last part, if we wonder how a book can reflect our life, we need to detect the writer's writing motivation to tell which parts are subjective. Sima Qian earned this writing opportunity from his father, Sima Tan. Then he insisted on doing this job, even lose his manliness due to the feudal punishment. This is the main difference between him and other historians. Others do this job for their interests, we can call it positive writing, but Sima negatively wrote his work, from his father's command. Thus he can finish this job, but with no interests, he would not have any creativity. The ancient Chinese historical style was, in any case, to preserve traditions rather than to get at the truth [6]. The duty of preservation became many Chinese jobs. As for the truth, they don't want to touch it. And as a hereditary official historian, Sima only focused on those elites and ignored local costumes and people's living standards.

There is another very important point that we cannot neglect. That is why Sima still insisted on finishing his job, even sacrificed his dignity? He made the self-sacrifice and treated the castration all can be symbolized as his father's last command. As people followed that, they lose their opportunities to feel or comment on things by themselves. They obey their ancestors' commands or treat them as religious doctrines. Unfortunately, the governors encouraged this activity. They called it "piety" [7]. When we change our eyesight toward Herodotus or Tacitus, we noticed they don't need to follow such rules passively. If we expand it, we can conclude that no one can decide who they are or who they want to be without the crucial piety. The crucial piety may be the core of the social issue: Why can the Chinese not embrace democracy? And why they allowed such a tyrant government to live for such a long time?

That's the reason why we considered Sima Qian's records as an influential and sophisticated mirror.

### **3. THE DISTANCE OF THE PUBLIC AND THE EMPIRE**

In modern society, we all noticed that people tend to classify the world as two-part: the democratic areas and the undemocratic areas. People with normal intelligence are all looking forward to living in a democratic area.

But in some eastern countries, because of the radiation from the Western countries, civils in the eastern countries may have awarded the value of the democracy. Still, exactly, the major of them never want to connect with the political activities. The only thing they want to do is live in a feudal society and achieve their careers. Some researchers owed it to the consequence of the long distance between the eastern and the empire's political activity in ancient times.

This research transfers the public's view to a historical problem. Thus, if we want to detect why eastern people are likely to show their ignorance to the political activity or how they behaved it, we need to discover the answers from the historical records.

Sima Qian divided the Grand Scribes of Records into many different parts. Those emperors and ministers, as the elites, cannot provide us the evidence. Sima himself ignored normal plebeians. But there also has one career, as the mortals have something to do with the political society, the assassins. We can search for their motivations and solve the questions.

In Sima's historical book, he described five assassins, Cao Mo, Yu Rang, Zhuan Zhu, Nie Zheng, and Ching K'o. Historians nowadays argued Cao Mo was an emissary, not an assassin. Therefore we can detect the other four assassins to conclude. About the Chinese assassins, it may be little contradicted to the research, Chinese plebeians, they don't want to be involved in the political combat, why they finally take actions to finish the elites' life? After we date back to their motivation, we can conclude: their motivations are more like rewarding or follow their parents' order. The evidence can be searched in the Records. The reason why Zhuan Zhu assassinated Liao, the king of Wu state because he was treated very well by the employee He Lu. And this reason was close to the motivation of why Yu Rang wants to murdered Xiang Zi, and K'o wants to kill the first emperor of Qin. When Ching K'o was treated as the minister, he felt honored and refused to stay in Yan. And gradually, with the horsemen, beautiful women were provided from the Prince, he gradually agreed to take action. Did his justice operate k'o in his mind? Obviously, it wasn't. The fact was he had visited Yan many years ago before the Prince was employing him, and the violence of the Qin empire had begun for several years. Therefore if he really operated by his kindness or justice, he will take action at that time. But what had he done during that period? He was just addicted to the wine and made some intimate friends. The records read: When Ching K'o reached Yan, he became fond of a dog-butcher from Yan and Gao Jianli, a skilled lute-player. Ching K'o was addicted to wine, and every day he had a drink in the marketplace at the Yan capital with the dog-butcher and Gao Jianli. After they got drunk, Gao Jianli played the lute, and Ching K'o sang in harmony with him in the

marketplace. As they had taken their pleasures together, so when they finished, they wept together as if there were nobody else about. Maybe someone wants to preserve Ching K'o, and they arguably explain away the activities Ching K'o had done as: he has been aware that Qin's violence, he was just waiting for the opportunity to assassinate the first emperor, after all, the first emperor was a notorious tyrant in the Chinese history. Well, it seems reasonable to explain Chinese plebeians are close to political life. Unfortunately, it wasn't. Let's change our view to the other assassins, Yu Rang and Zhuan Zhu. Yu Rang's aim, Zhao Xiang Zi, as history recorded, was a generous and outstanding elite. As Sima recorded, Xiang Zi is aware that Yu Rang wants to assassinate him, but he won't punish Yu Rang. On the contrary, when we contrast Xiang Zi with Yu Rang's master, Zhi Bo, this man was aggressive and arrogant. And he has started many wars. Therefore if Yu Rang really focuses on political life, he wouldn't have revenge. After gathered such analyses, we can conclude, Chinese plebeians have a long-distance political life. They were finally involved in it because they had been treated well by their masters, and they want to reward them.

They were taking comparison with the Western and the Eastern. The Western countries also had many famous assassins. Such as Marcus Junius Brutus Caepio, the main assassin, assassinated the Roman leader: Caesar. In the early times, Brutus was close to Caesar, even after Caesar defeated Pompey. As a follower of Pompey, Brutus was forgiven by Caesar, and Caesar treated him as well as before. However, Caesar's attempts to assume greater power for himself put him at greater odds with the Roman elite and members of the Senate. Eventually, Brutus opposed Caesar and organized Caesar's assassination, the man who treated Brutus as his son. When we are searching for the reason, we can find that Brutus firmly believes the doctrines of the Optimists, an elitist conservative political faction. This party deeply agreed on Republicanism, whatever who threaded their republic system. They will punish them. This doctrine, we can also call "the universal value", Westerns combined by the same value, and gradually become a sticky and solid organization: the country. By the way, the man Pompey, whom Brutus followed, was the enemy who killed his father. Brutus, who was already an officer, but people like Charlotte Corday, who was a normal civilian, could be involved in political events. Charlotte Corday was not a member of the rival of Jacobin. She was only a citizen who was against the radical policy of Jacobin and wanted to implement the action to stop it. She did not represent anyone but herself, as a discommender not belonging to any political power. She thought that the behavior of Jacobin would make the whole society a mess. The thoughts from Ideological emancipation such as Enlightenment made her suspect the trend of the

revolution after Jacabin came into power. This kind of liberation on peoples' thoughts shortens the distance between the public and government. Normal civilians not only had their own political site but also even got involved more or less. Also, religious belief can make people involved in political activities positive. The assassination of the Tibetan emperor Lang darma was an intensive example. One of the main leaders in this assassination was Langdarma's daughter, Sang Zha darma. And when we date back to the reason, it was obviously the punishment for Langdarma's persecution toward Tibetan Buddhism. But China never formed such ecumenical or same value [8-10].

Besides, when we look for the assassinations from Grand Scribe's Records, we can discover another motivation: piety. Take Nie Zheng as an example, he has tolerated poverty, and he still insists on his career to be a butcher. And when the master Yan Zhong Zi wants him to be his assassin, he takes advantage of Nie Zheng's piety. Zhong Zi sends the gold to his mother. Therefore, after Nie Zheng's mother was dead, he agreed to be Zhong Zi's plan. This kind of piety was unconscious piety. People take methods not for themselves or for their judgment but piety. This also blocks the way for people's own awareness. Moreover, because of unconscious piety, they are afraid to fall into political life and don't want to carry any social duty.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To tell the fact, eastern people, especially Chinese plebeians with neither universal value nor common political sense, have never gathered as an organization positively. They only take actions to reward others' well treatment or from their piety. They considered political life as a strange and meaningless life. They are far away from the government. They are seldom aware that they consist the country, they agreed they are only the country member, similar to the collective unconsciousness. But Western empires are different, people all followed the integral values. With no centralized ideology, western people with the same values or same beliefs gradually become the country's prototype. And as this pattern, democracy seems easy to root in their soil, and people will hold a much closer life to politics. Suppose we now want Eastern people to accept democracy and eliminate the old imperialism ideology. In that case, we need to minimize the distance between them and the country and nurture the same value or even a universal value. So that they will consider themselves as the host of the country, and they will positively take actions but not in an emotional way without their own judgement to what they faced to.

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