



# An Analysis of the Reasons for the Poor Evaluation of Huo Qubing in Records of the Historian

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**Abstract.** Huo Qubing was a famous military general of the Han Dynasty who led his soldiers to win many battles against the Xiongnu. However, he was not highly regarded in the Records of the Historian, and this study suggests that the reasons for this are mainly due to Sima Qian's dissatisfaction with the late policy shift of Emperor Wu of Han, his belief that Huo's strength was exaggerated, and Huo's status as a relative of Wei Zifu. In addition, Huo's slave status and the fact that he killed Li Gan also influenced Sima Qian's evaluation of Huo to some extent, but not mainly.

**Keywords:** Records of the Historian · Huo Qubing · Sima Qian · Wei Qing · Han Dynasty

## 1 Introduction

Huo Qubing was a famous military general of the Western Han Dynasty who fought against the Xiongnu and explored the territory many times, and to a certain extent established the geographical scope of ancient China. Later generations also esteemed him highly. For example, “The jade target, the horns, the bow, the bead, the horse, the Han general will give Huo Qubing.” “Who is this marvelous general, it is definitely Huo Qubing.” However, Records of the Historian does not give him much credit. The first mention of Huo Qubing in the Records of the Historian - General Wei's Biography is “In this year, Huo Qubing, the sister's son of the grand general, was eighteen years old and fortunate enough to be in the service of the emperor”<sup>1</sup>, only using a word “fortune” to summarize the fate of his whole life. What's more, Sima Qian even mentions Wei Qing and Huo Qubing in his chapter on sycophants. Although he affirmed their aggressive intentions and ambition, the derogatory emotion behind his words can still be seen.

Therefore, this paper aims to briefly analyze and discuss the reasons why “Records of the Historian” does not have high evaluation of Huo Qubing, and present the views based on the historical data and the appraisal of the later generations.

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<sup>1</sup> See [1].

## 2 Analysis of the Reasons

### 2.1 Literature Review

The reasons for Sima Qian's inferior, even derogatory, evaluation of Wei and Huo have been studied by some scholars: Chen Xi (2009)<sup>2</sup> believe that it was the political and moral reasons that led Sima Qian to have relatively bad opinions of Huo rather than the decline of the Wei family in the later period. It lied specifically in Sima Qian's dissatisfaction with the late war policy shift of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, as well as the Huo's failure to achieve a better reputation and prestige among the society class at that time. Pang Zhengliang and Cao Liangliang (1987)<sup>3</sup> and others believe that the reason for this is that Sima Qian believed that Huo Qubing is more in reputation than in reality, his strength and battle record are exaggerated, and his achievement is mainly due to luck and the favor and support of Emperor Wu of Han. Besides, they do not approve of Huo's character and style, feeling that he is an egoistic, tyrannical, ferocious, and arrogant fanatic who does not appreciate and care for his soldiers. Zhang Xiuzhen<sup>4</sup> (2015), in his analysis of Huo's writing, concludes that Huo's invincibility in battle was mainly due to his "heavenly fortune" and Emperor Wu's support in terms of armed forces, military strategy, and merit and title. Liu Yunzhi (1999)<sup>5</sup> also argues that the reason for Huo's low evaluation in Records of the Historian is that Sima Qian did not approve of his ability and character, and believed that Wei and Huo mainly benefited from heavenly fortune and nepotism of Wei Zifu who was the empress of Han.

Therefore, this paper attempts to summarize the views of previous authors into four aspects: Sima Qian's dissatisfaction with the policy shift in the late Han Dynasty, his belief that Huo's strength was exaggerated, his dislike of his reputation and style, and his disapproval of the nepotism of the Han relatives.

### 2.2 Analysis of Previous Views

#### Dissatisfaction of Policy Shift

First of all, this paper supports the first point that Sima Qian was dissatisfied with the late policy changes of Emperor Wu, but does not consider it a major factor. At the beginning, Emperor Wu launched a proactive attack against Xiongnu, the "whip of God" on the border, based on the idea of "honoring the king and expelling the barbarians" of the Gong Yang school. Sima Qian, who claimed in his preface that "Xiongnu was always a problem for China", should have been pleased with this, and his support for Emperor Wu's initial crusade against the Xiongnu system led him to acknowledge the achievements of Wei Qing and Huo Qubing. However, the war, which was not extinguished for a long time, left the Han people without a place to live, leading to tragedy that the population was greatly reduced, and the treasury was empty. Under these circumstances, the war, which

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<sup>2</sup> See [2].

<sup>3</sup> See [7].

<sup>4</sup> See [9].

<sup>5</sup> Liu Yunzhi. A brief comment on Sima Qian's evaluation of Huo Qubing [J]. Chinese Culture, 1999(04):33-34.

was originally based on justice, became the culprit of the people's suffering. In his biographies of Wei Qing and Huo Zaodi, Sima Qian's political helplessness, his disgust for war and his sympathy for the citizens all added to his critical thinking, and he lost the literary aesthetic perspective of their glorious achievements.

### **Disapproval of Huo's Ability and Achievements**

There are several records in *Records of the Historian* that show Sima Qian's doubts about the results of Huo's battle, such as the record of Huo's first expedition "with 800 brave soldiers who leaved the army for hundreds of miles to kill enemies with the result of 2028 captives", which can be seen that Huo led his troops with 800 cavalry to kill and capture 2,028 of the enemy, which was a good harvest. However, whether the two thousand or so of them were logistical troops is not clearly recorded by Sima Qian. The disapproval of Huo's strength is mainly mirrored in Sima Qian's attribution of Huo's achievements to the will of God and the preference of Emperor Wu of Han.

Huo attained the marquis at the age of eighteen, compared with Li Guang, who had more than seventy battles in his life but was not crowned marquis until his death, Huo's career was much smoother. In the battle in the north of the desert, Wei Qing and the leader of Xiongnu Chan Yu struggled to get around but did not get many awards. Li Guang even chose to kill himself after losing his way during the war, and also relegated to a concubine. However, Huo went through long distance but did not encounter hard and complicated battle. Moreover, the army was not even affected by any major losses, and all of his soldiers were even awarded marquises. In just a few years of his combat career, Huo was invincible in all his attacks and battles, so Sima Qian remarked that "the army was fortunate enough not to be trapped.

In addition to his good luck, Sima Qian also held the belief that Huo's success also attributed to Emperor Wu's support and preference. For example, in the battle of Hexi, "the soldiers of the generals were not as good as those of Huo's". So Huo had the best of the whole army, and with the advantage of the unique wonderful soldiers and horses, as well as military power, thereby contributing to relatively easy success. The Han dynasty had strict penalties, and generals who exaggerated the results of their battles would be punished. Nevertheless, Emperor Wu not only gave Huo the opportunity to make meritorious achievements, but also allowed him to exaggerate his achievements, making him famous and gaining both fame and fortune. Additionally, Emperor Wu even wrote his own edict to record his war achievements. In *Records of the Historian*, Sima Qian often quoted from Emperor Wu's imperial edict, including his achievements in the simple phrase "The Emperor—Son of Heaven said", which showed that Sima Qian was dissatisfied with the imperial edict and his exaggerated achievements.

Therefore, this essay also supports this perspective.

### **Dislike of Personality and Style**

For the third point that Sima Qian did not like Huo's character and style, this paper does not quite support. The reason for this is that there was no big criticism of the personality and habitats of Wei Qing and Huo Qubing, and the biggest controversy of Huo was not compassionate enough to soldiers, and sometimes were a little arrogant. Like what *Records of the Historian* mentioned, "soldiers outside of the desert lacked food and were physically exhausted, but Huo Qubing lived in good conditions". There have also

been some condemnations of his prodigal lifestyle, however, these are comparatively justifiable, not so much as to make the impartial historian biased, and even be referred to several times in the “Sycophant Biography”. What’s more, Li Guang, who was beloved by others, was not a perfect hero in Records of the Historian. Sima Qian praised Li Guang’s good qualities of being courteous, compassionate to his soldiers, humble and clean, but Li Guang’s vengefulness that he was brutally killed Captain Bailing just because he did not allow him to travel at night was also recorded clearly by Sima Qian. Thus, the characters under Sima Qian’s writing are “three-dimensional” characters with both strengths and weaknesses, so that he did not hate some characters because of one or two insignificant flaws.

### **Dislike for Nepotism**

The last one is Huo’s relationship with his empress, namely Wei Zifu, which is one of the greatest influences considered in this article. Sima Qian had always disliked relatives of concubines of emperor. For instance, to Emperor Wu’s own uncle, Marquis Wu’an Tian Fen, Sima Qian described his extravagant life and despicable personality in detail: “Marquis Wu’an, the appearance of whom was ugly, led an extremely luxurious life”. It can be seen that Sima Qian was more than disgusted with Tian Fen. Therefore, for Wei Qing and Huo Qubing, as relatives too, Sima Qian also had the similar feelings and attitudes towards them. At the end of “Sycophant Biography”, he also mentioned the status of Wei and Huo as relatives, “Wei Qing and Huo Qubing gained good fortune as relatives”, but their battle performance and positive progress could not be denied, so Sima Qian also objectively evaluated that “they were quite capable of advancing if they harness the materials and resources”.

## **2.3 Other Factors**

In addition, this paper also reckons that there are two other reasons why Records of the Historian did not have a high opinion of Huo Qubing, namely that Sima Qian disdained Huo Qubing’s origin and that he was angry with Huo Qubing for shooting Li Dang.

The first reason has to do with Huo’s illegitimate status as a slave. From the preface at the beginning of Records of the Historian, we can see that Sima Qian valued his family background and origin, and was proud of it. The Wei family was originally from the bottom of the social class, and relied on Wei Zifu’s relationship to turn around in one day. Wei Qing, who had used to be a slave, Wei Zifu, who was a songstress, and Huo Qubing, who was an illegitimate son, naturally had large class gap with Sima Qian, whose family had been historians for generations. However, based on the pioneering spirit and innovation of Chen She, Sima Qian dared to establish a biography part for him, which shows his advanced view of history. Therefore, this view may be a little controversial, and this paper argues that Huo’s origin may have influenced Sima Qian’s view and emotion to some extent, but not the main reason.

In addition, Sima Qian’s dislike of Huo Qubing was also related to his killing of Li Gan. As mentioned before, Sima Qian was born a noble family, so he was emotionally closer to the Longxi Li clan, which was also an aristocratic family. Besides, Li Guang was close to Sima Qian in personal, as can be seen from the “Tai Shi Gong said” in Sima Qian’s credit of the Li clan. However, Huo Qubing avenged his uncle Wei Qing

and shot Li Guang's son Li Gan in public at Ganquan Palace, which undoubtedly put himself in the opposite side of the Li clan. The Emperor Han even claimed that "Li Gan was killed by a deer when hunting" to cover up for Huo Qubing, which aggravated Sima Qian's anger and displeasure towards Huo Qubing. So his dislike for Huo Shaoqi also deepened inevitably.

### 3 Conclusion

In summary, this paper deems that the reasons for Sima Qian's low evaluation of Huo Qubing are mainly due to Sima Qian's dissatisfaction with the late policy shift of Emperor Wu of Han, his belief that Huo Qubing's capability was exaggerated, and Huo Qubing's relationship with Wei Zifu. Moreover, Huo Qubing's origins as a slave and his killing of Li Gan could also be taken into consideration, but these two factors were not the main reasons.

Indeed, since *Records of the Historian* has been praised "the unique work of the historians, the Lisao without rhythm", there is no need to question its rigorous academic attitude. Sima Qian may have been a little biased and disapproving of Wei Qing and Huo Qubing, but he did record their achievements in a practical way. Compared with the description of Li Guang, the portrayal of Wei and Huo are indeed less vivid, but there is no ground for blame. Therefore, even through a thousand years, we can know that the great general Wei directly attacked the dragon city to raise the prestige in the north desert, the champion marquis Huo Qubing crossed the desert to make outstanding achievements. Sima Qian sympathize with Li Guang, but never fabricated his merits out of nothing, only on the basis of the factual record of his legend of shooting arrows into the stone, lamenting his talent, and pious ambition and aspirations. But as for his personal receipt of the seal of the king of Liang, killing surrendered soldiers, revenging for the death of Bailing Lieutenant, several times lost in the war and other negative events, Sima Qian were not spared, to the maximum extent to achieve the objective record.

Thus, this is what makes Sima Qian worthy of respect. Everyone has his own affinity and dislikes, and Sima Qian is no exception. Nevertheless, although he had his own preferences, he did not "invent" history to serve his own perspectives and break the scales of objectivity and impartiality, but recorded every historical fact authentically and at length, which is enough to be called "the sage of the historians".

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