



The Evolution of the Political Status of Historians from the Pre-Qin Period to the Western Han Dynasty and Its Causes

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Abstract. The official historians of ancient China held the authority to compile historical records and played a pivotal role in the nation's political life. However, from the pre-Qin period to the Western Han dynasty, the political standing of historians fluctuated with the times, exhibiting an overall decline. This shift was rooted in profound social, political, and cultural factors. Since the turn of the century, numerous scholars have conducted detailed studies on the status of historians. Nevertheless, these investigations have varied in focus and have been constrained by factors such as the time periods examined, subjects studied, and research perspectives, resulting in a scarcity of systematic analyses. This paper employs a literature review methodology to examine relevant materials and scholarly works, analyzing the evolution of the political status of historians from the Xia and Shang dynasties through the Western Han period and the underlying causes behind these changes. It identifies a discernible pattern: from the perspective of historical materialism, the decline in the political standing of historians from the pre-Qin era to the Western Han period was an almost inevitable consequence of historical progress. This will make research in the relevant areas more systematic.

Keywords: Pre-Qin Period to Early Western Han Dynasty; The Political Status of Historians; Evolution.

1 Introduction

As compilers of historical records, ancient Chinese historians were intrinsically linked to the development of historiography and played a pivotal role in the nation's political life. From commanding the study of celestial phenomena and human affairs, holding high rank and great authority, and being regarded as narrative authorities, to being described in Sima Qian's Letter to Ren An as “Literary and historical chronicles, akin to divination and fortune-telling, are merely the emperor's amusement, kept by court jesters and actors, and scorned by the common folk.”—the political status of historians underwent a tremendous decline [1-2]. Since the beginning of the 21st century, numerous scholars have conducted detailed studies on the status of historians, yet each has focused on distinct aspects. For instance, Gong Jiawen confined his analysis

to the critical pre-Qin period, lacking continuity; Wang Shumin concentrated on tracing the evolution of historians' status during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods but neglected to delve deeply into the underlying causes; and Qin Jing-yu approached the subject from specific angles such as "compiling records", failing to incorporate diverse perspectives. Consequently, systematic discussions on the topic remain relatively scarce [3-5].

This paper aims to systematically review existing research findings through a literature review approach. It will trace the evolution of the political status of official historians from the Pre-Qin period to the Western Han Dynasty—a relatively long historical span—and analyze the underlying causes of this transformation. By identifying certain patterns and regularities, the study seeks to advance the systematic development of academic research in this field.

2 Xia and Shang Dynasties

Currently, it is widely accepted in academic circles that during the Xia and Shang dynasties, the roles of shaman and historian were not distinct. Zhong Qiyian pointed out that during this period, official historians not only held authority over document drafting and archive management but also concurrently performed duties related to divination and sacrificial rites [6]. Armin Selbitschka also believes that historians of this period not only handled clerical duties but also needed to be proficient in divination, rites and laws, arithmetic, and medical knowledge [7]. As a dual vassal to both divine and royal authority, their status was subordinate to the royal shamanic group. Their primary functions were divination and chronicling events. Holding the Study of Heaven and Humanity, they commanded a lofty position by validating the legitimacy of the monarch's rule.

During the Xia and Shang dynasties, the level of productive forces was relatively low. People could not reasonably explain many phenomena through their existing knowledge and could only attribute them to the mighty forces of "Heaven" and "the gods". As a special group capable of interpreting divine will and seeking divine oracles, the status of official historians naturally rose accordingly. The so-called "great affairs of the state lie in sacrifices and warfare" is commonly interpreted today as meaning that a nation's foremost priorities are sacrificial rites and military campaigns [8]. Some scholars have interpreted this through research and analysis as meaning that the foremost affairs of the state are sacrificial rites and military rites [9]. However, differing interpretations of "sacrifices and warfare" do not detract from revealing the ancient people's fervent devotion to religious mystery. Regardless, the official historian, who held sacrificial authority and was well-versed in the rites and laws, must have enjoyed a lofty status at that time.

At the same time, the authority to draft documents and preserve archives granted to both the royal scribes and the historians themselves elevated the latter to cultural monopolists, endowing them with high cultural literacy and professional competence. Moreover, the hereditary system of "no transfer of duties, no change of office" further reinforced the stability of the historiographical official class, thereby solidifying its

position within the political system [10]. Additionally, ancient China was an agricultural civilization. Given the limitations of production tools and techniques, the development of agriculture was inseparable from astronomical knowledge. This prompted official historians to play a crucial role in observing celestial phenomena and formulating calendars, further shrouding them in mystique and thereby indirectly elevating their political standing.

3 Western Zhou Dynasty

Existing research indicates that the Zhou dynasty witnessed the separation of shamans and historians, with the functions of the historical officials becoming more clearly defined and their responsibilities more specialized. This period marked China's historical official system of historians towards the maturation. Compared to the high priests of the Shang dynasty, the status of the Western Zhou historians declined. Their administrative functions were strengthened while their celestial duties diminished, yet they remained important government officials. The *Rites of Zhou* states that the Grand Historian was responsible for overseeing the six major codes and institutions of the kingdom, using them to evaluate the governance of feudal states. That the Grand Historian administered the laws of state governance demonstrates his deep involvement in national political affairs and his lofty status [10].

By the Western Zhou period, the rulers' focus had gradually shifted from "Heaven" to "humanity". The *Book of Rites* records: "The people of the Shang dynasty revered the gods, leading the populace in divine worship, honoring the gods before observing rituals... The people of the Zhou dynasty respected the gods while keeping them at a distance, drawing close to the common people" [10]. This passage means that the Shang people revered the gods, with the rulers leading the populace in serving the deities, placing the spirits above the rites and ceremonies. The Zhou people revered rites and valued bestowing favors upon the people, serving and honoring the gods, while deliberately keeping their distance from them. In the early years of the Western Zhou dynasty, having witnessed the succession of the Xia and Shang dynasties, the rulers inevitably harbored doubts about the "Mandate of Heaven" doctrine that had prevailed during the Shang period. Despite the Shang people's reverence for gods, they still lost the Mandate of Heaven and were replaced by the Zhou people. This demonstrates that the Mandate of Heaven does not depend entirely on the gods. At this time, rulers gradually came to realize that the stability of their regime could not be entirely dependent on the Mandate of Heaven or supernatural forces. Consequently, they shifted their focus from the ways of Heaven to human affairs. Their proposal of the governing principle of "revering Heaven and caring for the people" also reflected the shift in the early Zhou rulers' understanding of the relationship between Heaven and humanity. It was precisely the shift in rulers' perceptions that brought about a transformation in the functions of official historians. This transformation signified that historians could no longer stand on equal footing with rulers by virtue of divine authority. Thus, the decline in the status of official historians became inevitable.

4 The Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods

The Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods were times of great social upheaval and transformation, during which the status of official historians also faced severe challenges. In the early Spring and Autumn period, official historians still held a relatively high status. With their profound knowledge, they assisted rulers in handling state affairs and were held in high esteem. Confucius once sought guidance on rites from Laozi, the archivist of the Zhou dynasty's imperial library, and praised Laozi's profound knowledge and thought as being "like a dragon" [11]. However, by the middle of the Spring and Autumn period, as social division of labor became more specialized, the functions of the official historian also underwent corresponding changes. The three functions of historical officials—documentation, archival management, and historical recording—gradually diverged. Their status began to decline, manifesting in their transformation from high-ranking officials involved in governance and policy deliberation into politically marginalized figures dedicated solely to chronicling history and managing archives. By the Warring States period, the status of official historians had fallen to such a disgraceful low that no one would accept the position. Meanwhile, as the status of court historians declined, the group itself underwent fragmentation. Some historians became administrative officials specializing in clerical and archival duties, such as the Imperial Secretary and the Censor. Others became intellectuals in civilian life, with some later becoming Confucian scholars.

During this period, the breakdown of the clan system had a profound impact on the status of official historians. From "rite, music, campaigns, and punitive expeditions emanating from the Son of Heaven" to "rite, music, campaigns, and punitive expeditions emanating from the feudal lords", the authority over ceremonial rites, music, warfare, and punitive actions spread from the Son of Heaven to the feudal lords [10]. This reflects that the rites and laws no longer held effective sway over the increasingly powerful feudal lords, and the prestige of the Zhou Son of Heaven had significantly declined. Since the Zhou Son of Heaven received his mandate from Heaven, the authority of the historians who served him was naturally called into question.

Beyond this, the further shift in the concept of Heaven's Way also played a significant role in the decline of the status of court historians. The feudal lords gradually realized during the chaotic and brutal wars of conquest that dominating the realm required developing national strength, which depended on human governance rather than divine mandate. With the rise of the notion that "the foundation of the world lies in the state, the foundation of the state lies in the family, and the foundation of the family lies in the individual," rulers began to place greater emphasis on practical politics and personnel administration, gradually reducing their reliance on the heavenly mandate [10]. They began reforming the political system, seeking talent from among the common people. The hereditary officialdom system gradually collapsed, replaced by the feudal bureaucratic system. This political transformation meant that the position of official historian was no longer a hereditary post passed down through family lineages, but one that could be held by any talented individual. In this context, a large number of official historians migrated from the imperial court to the feudal states.

This was both a consequence of the decline in the status of official historians and a factor that further exacerbated their diminished standing.

Simultaneously, with the rise of private schools initiated by Confucius, the traditional framework of learning confined to official circles was disrupted. Cultural knowledge began to permeate the common people, fundamentally undermining the core foundation that had defined the role of the official historian. The widespread dissemination of cultural knowledge has led to a far greater number of individuals capable of performing clerical duties than ever before, providing the various noble families with a much broader pool of talent to choose from. Some newly appointed historians willingly became household servants to noble families. Though their positions were lowly, their duties remained unchanged from those of historians in the old dynasty, thus rendering the status of historians increasingly insignificant. Another consequence of the widespread dissemination of cultural knowledge was the gradual emergence of a trend among the populace to critique and write history. While this trend to some extent promoted the spread and development of culture, it also gave rise to certain unserious tendencies, thereby undermining the authority of the official historians.

More crucially, during this period, royal authority gradually surpassed divine authority. As rulers gained increasing control over realpolitik, their reliance on divine authority gradually diminished. The historian, serving as a bridge between divine authority and royal power, inevitably saw his status affected. When the monarch no longer required the support of divine authority, the historian's existence became redundant.

The traditional professional ethics of historians—to “record truthfully with the pen” and “document every action of the ruler”—required them to faithfully document the words and deeds of those in power. Rulers naturally wish to avoid leaving a stain on their legacy in the annals of history, lest it tarnish their personal reputation and harm the interests of the nation. “There were no just wars in the Spring and Autumn period”. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the traditional order collapsed. The constant warfare and rivalry among the feudal states for supremacy violated the established rite, and rulers resorted to any means necessary to achieve victory [10]. Therefore, the professional ethics of historians during this period conflicted with the sovereign's will, potentially exposing them to violent threats from the rulers. The *Zuo Zhuan* records the following: “The chief historian wrote: ‘Cui Zhu killed his sovereign.’ Cui Zhu had him executed. His younger brother took over the writing, and two men died. His other younger brother then took over the writing, and they let him go. When Nan Shi Scribe heard that all the chief historians had been killed, he took his writing brush and went to take over. Upon learning that the record had already been written, he turned back” [8]. This passage recounts how the Grand Historian of Qi and one of his brothers were executed by Cui Zhu for truthfully recording “Cui Zhu's regicide”. Only when Cui Zhu witnessed the Grand Historian's second brother steadfastly continuing his accurate documentation did he cease altering the historical records. Upon hearing this news, Nan Shi Scribe arrived bearing scrolls bearing the same truthful account. He departed only after confirming the historical records had been faithfully preserved. Historians who fear no tyranny are in-

deed immortalized in the annals of history. The brothers of the Qi Grand Historian and the Nan Shi Scribe, who truthfully recorded “Cui Zhu's regicide”, are still celebrated today as exemplary historians. But if rulers persist in their stubborn ways, as Cui Zhu did in his relentless slaughter, it is not inconceivable that the lineage of the Qi Grand Historian could be wiped out, severing their family heritage. This makes it difficult to ensure the professional competence of subsequent historians. If historians yield to violence, it would deal a severe blow to the professional ethics of historians and the very function of historical record-keeping. In the first year of Lord Zhao's reign, the Duke of Zheng and his ministers made an alliance at the residence of Gong-sun Duan. This chronicler of Zheng thus became an example of one who succumbed to violence [10]. Thus, the stripping of historians' rights to participate in and deliberate on state affairs, coupled with their precipitous decline in status, was an unavoidable consequence of the growing imperial authority clashing with the historians' functions against the backdrop of the times.

5 From the Qin Dynasty to the Western Han Dynasty

It should be noted that within the bureaucratic system of the Qin and Han dynasties, there were also distinctions in status among the historians. For example, the position of Grand Historian, held by Sima Tan and his son Sima Qian, carried a relatively high status. However, the vast majority of historians during this period served as subordinate officials. Zhu Teng also pointed out that within the Qin court historians, there existed a distinction between chief officials and assistant officials [12]. The Qin Dynasty established a unified empire and instituted a feudal autocratic centralized system, with the status of court historians continuing the overall decline that had begun during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. By the Western Han Dynasty, Sima Qian remarked, “Literary and historical chronicles, akin to divination and fortune-telling, are merely the emperor's amusement, kept by court jesters and actors, and scorned by the common folk” [1]. Sima Qian believed that at this time, the status of historians was akin to that of shamans and priests—they were essentially kept by the emperor for amusement, treated as entertainers, and looked down upon by society. This clearly shows that the political standing of historians had become extremely low, having completely degenerated into mere appendages of the ruling class.

The Qin Dynasty established a unified empire with vast territories, and this transformation in state structure had a profound impact on the imperial historians. Undoubtedly, the unification achieved by the Qin Empire led to a series of consequences, including territorial expansion, population growth, and the integration of different ethnic groups. This also meant that new situations and challenges would frequently arise, requiring rulers and officials to confront increasingly complex administrative tasks. All matters under heaven, great and small, are decided by the sovereign [11]. The emperor must oversee affairs of every scale, and naturally cannot rely solely on officials at the central court for information; he requires reports from local officials. Concurrently, the Qin Dynasty maintained a strict administrative system. “When requesting matters, one must do so in writing; do not make oral requests, nor make re-

quests through intermediaries.” This required Qin officials to report on the handling of official business in written form, prohibiting them from conveying matters personally or through verbal intermediaries [13]. Thus, the specialization of bureaucratic functions and the massive circulation of documents became practical necessities for the empire. Historians with strong document drafting and administrative skills were consequently confined to a career centered on paperwork. Moreover, because the Qin Dynasty implemented a centralized administrative system with vertical management from the central government to local authorities, power was stratified. As a result, official historians were appointed at multiple levels within the government apparatus. At the central level, the Grand Censor served as the emperor’s “keeper of the imperial archives and secret documents”; at the local level, there were chief clerks and clerks who served the local officials [1]. Within the vast territories of the Qin Dynasty, the number of local officials naturally far exceeded that of central officials. Thus, most historians had been assigned to lower-level posts, with the great majority spending their entire careers confined to the lowest echelons of the bureaucratic system [14].

As previously emphasized, the rise of monarchical authority was a key factor in the decline of the status of official historians during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. In the Qin and Han empires, imperial authority held supreme, and the unified nature of the state led to historiography increasingly serving the interests of the ruling class. Compiling national histories serves to extol achievements and praise virtues; writing truthfully with an impartial pen will only invite punishment. Thus, by this period, court historians had become entirely subservient to the rulers, even those of higher rank. Taking the Grand Historian of the Western Han Dynasty as an example, Emperor Wu of Han was fond of immortality practices and alchemy. Thus, the Grand Historian served both as the Minister of Heavenly Affairs and the Chief Historian, seemingly possessing some of the authority held by historians during the Shang Dynasty. Emperor Xuan of Han, however, showed little interest in theology, and thus the responsibilities of the Grand Historian were further diminished. Besides, Liu Shiwei also pointed out that the phenomenon of “other officials encroaching upon the duties of historians”—such as Chu Shaosun and Liu Xiang gradually taking over the original responsibilities of the official historians—was another major reason why the Grand Historian became an official solely responsible for divination and observation after Emperor Xuan [15].

6 Conclusion

In summary, from the pre-Qin period to the Western Han dynasty, the political status of court historians underwent significant changes due to multiple factors, exhibiting an overall downward trend. Against the backdrop of underdeveloped productivity, the official historian first emerged as a spokesperson for the heavens and deities, occupying a position of transcendent authority. With the advancement of productive forces, rulers’ conceptions of the Mandate of Heaven underwent transformation, leading to the evolution and refinement of the functions of official historians. During the unique period of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the breakdown of the

clan system and the suppression of cultural knowledge transmission undermined the authority of court historians. Concurrently, the development of productive forces laid the groundwork for the rise of monarchical power. Ultimately, the status of historians—whose duty to record history and professional ethics conflicted with royal authority—could only decline. It is evident that, from the perspective of historical materialism, the decline in the political status of court historians from the pre-Qin period to the Western Han Dynasty was almost an inevitable outcome of the times' progress. This paper systematizes existing research by examining the evolution of the political status of court historians from the Xia and Shang dynasties to the Western Han period and the underlying reasons for these changes. However, this paper has not yet been able to delve into the subsequent development of the differentiation among the group of historians during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Future research may begin here to explore the impact of the Qin Dynasty's book burning and burying of scholars alive on the status of official historians, as well as the rise of the theory of Chen and Wei and the shifting status of Confucian scholars from the mid-to-late Western Han Dynasty through the Eastern Han Dynasty.

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