Barbarians at the Gate x The China Books Review: Records of the Grand Historian by Sima Qian

Jeremiah Jenne: Hello and welcome to a special edition, a co-branded co-produced podcast Barbarians at the Gate with The China Books Review. I'm here with China Books Review associate editor, Alexander Boyd. Alexander, how are you?

Alexander Boyd: I'm doing great Jeremiah, thank you for having me on.

Jeremiah Jenne: So this is a feature that we're doing on a regular basis. I write a column for the China Books Review called the China Archives in which we do a retrospective review of some of the classics of China literature. And this week we have chosen one of the greatest historians, not just in Chinese history, but really in the history of writing history, Sima Qian.

What did you know about Sima Qian before we started working on this piece?

Alexander: Well, my first introduction to Sima Qian was as a student of Chinese, and in every single Chinese class you start off by choosing your Chinese name. And I would say about one half of the boys would always choose Sima as their last name in honor of Sima Qian. And I think because the double-barreled surname in Chinese is so rare that Sima was very popular. So I have pretty limited exposure to Sima Qian other than I know he's one of China's great historians, but in the same way that your average student of American history might have a passing knowledge of who Thucydides was, but never have actually read the book themselves. So that's why I love the archives column, because it's a chance to really dive into a figure that I'm only familiar with in passing.

Jeremiah Jenne: Yeah, there's always the lazy way to describe somebody like Sima Qian. He's the Chinese version of... So you get the, he's the Chinese version of Thucydides or something like that. And of course, yes, they are both classical historians. There's a certain amount of stylistic similarities, which are interesting, although there's no connection. But I think once again, when you start doing the Chinese version of, it always does a disservice to the person from China. I think we actually wrote in the column, calling him the Chinese version of Thucydides is like calling Zhang Yimou the Chinese Spielberg. Sure, they both direct movies. They're both wildly successful, but that really is where it stops.

Why don't we start, let's talk a little bit about who this guy, Sima Qian is. He's a fascinating figure. This is a person who worked at the court of the Han dynasty. So we're talking about 100 or so BC. Sima Qian, he actually inherited his father's position, and it's often translated as the grand historian. But really, it had a lot more to do with astrology, astronomy, divination. And it seems that Sima Qian's father Sima Tan began compiling an actual chronology of events of his world up to the time of the Han dynasty. And he passed away before he was able to do it.

He goes to his son, Sima Qian, and in fine and true Chinese fashion looks at his son and goes, "Finish this or you betray me, your ancestors, and everything I have ever stood for."

Jeremiah Jenne: And so that's where we leave Sima Qian working in the Han court, continuing his father's job as court astrologer, master of the Ouija board, and also carrying on this epic, growing project to record all of history up to that point.

Alexander: So what is all of history at that point? So for us, this is over 2000 years ago, 2200 years ago that he's writing this piece. In his world, what is all of history? Where does history begin and where does it take him?

Jeremiah Jenne: So he's looking back to the very earliest, what we sometimes think of as mythological figures in Chinese history. And it goes through some of the earliest dynasties as well. Much of what we know actually comes from the materials that were collected by Sima Qian. Some of it has been verified through archeological records.

But he goes back to the yellow emperor to the mythical emperors of Yao and Shun to some of the earliest dynasties, the Xia, the Shang, the Zhou, and then through the whole warring states period to the rise of Qin and then ultimately to where he is at that time.

The Han dynasty Chinese history is long anyway. And we're essentially talking about the first half of it. So it's always weird to date mythical figures. But I don't know, two and a half millennia of history that he's responsible for compiling in this family project.

Alexander: But so what makes this story of Sima Qian, at least in my opinion, so profound, is that it's not just that he's done a world historical feat of compiling. He's done it at next to paying the second greatest price, you could say. What happened to Sima Qian? What was Sima Qian's sacrifice, Jeremiah, for readers who don't know?

Jeremiah Jenne: If you're in any court, whether it's the Han dynasty, whether it's a medieval European court, whether it's Stalin's inner circle, or Mao's inner circle for that matter, your position is not only based on your ability to do your job, but to do your job in a way that does not piss off the boss.

And so the story is that around 100 BC or so, the emperor at the time, who's one of the most famous emperors in Chinese history, Han Wudi. There is an issue with one of his generals. One of his generals has defected or may have defected. This general who was a friend of Sima Qian's is now disgraced in the court. Everyone's speaking out against him. The emperor is furious. Sima Qian with the kind of loyalty that we wish all of our friends had, if not a lot of common sense, speaks up on behalf of his friend, angers the emperor. And when you anger an emperor, depending upon how hangry he is at the moment, the consequences can be...

What ends up happening? The emperor accuses Sima Qian speaking out of turn and orders Sima Qian to be executed. And that's a pretty common punishment. You could be executed for anything from high treason to spilling the soup.

But Sima Qian's problem is that he's more than willing to die himself, but he's got this job. His father has made him promise to finish this immense task. And if he's dead, that won't happen. And so he says, "Well, Emperor, is there an option B?" And the emperor says, "Absolutely. I will commute your sentence. Instead, you will be castrated."

Every Chinese history teacher tells this story like, yeah, so Sima Qian the man understood the assignment. He had 130 chapters, 526,000 characters to write and halfway through the job, he's faced with a choice of execution or castration. He chooses at the age of like 45 to be castrated. So my dear student, please explain to me again why you couldn't get your assignment in on time because quote unquote "the dorm's wifi is a little wonky."

It's one of the most famous stories in Chinese history. And it also has been the source of fascination, inspiration. Sima Qian wrote a very famous letter to a friend of his named Ren An. And in this letter, he talks about his decision. And I won't read the whole letter. It's a beautifully written letter, even if rendered into English, it's really beautiful.

He says:

"A man has only one death. That death might be as weighty as Mount Tai, or it might be as light as a goose feather. It all depends on the way he uses it."

"It's the nature of every man to love life and hate death, to think of his relatives, look after his wife and children. And only when a man is moved by higher principles is this not so. Then there are things he must do because the brave man does not always die for honor."

Let's all just take a moment and contemplate the pain of being castrated at 45, but also just the cultural meaning of this would be in any context, especially in China. It is the ultimate debasement, humiliation, degradation.

Alexander: I mean, especially when he's following a task set out for him by his father and Han Wudi is saying, that is going to be denied to you. I don't know if Sima Qian had children by this point already.

Jeremiah Jenne: I think it's an interesting point you brought up about the kids because this was something I was thinking about when I was writing the piece. We don't often talk about where he is in the life cycle. I mean, we talk about the fact that this kind of mutilation at any age is going to be painful, especially for an older person. But you're right, he's 45. Legend has it that he was married, that he had a daughter and he had two sons. The daughter... actually, her son, Sima Qian's grandson, is the one who will ultimately hold on to his writings, keeping them safe from the prying eyes of the emperor and his agents until the time becomes right to release them to the world.

The two sons, there's a legend that the two sons took fake names to avoid being similarly punished. And there are parts, there's a town in central China, I seem to remember, where there is a tradition that his descendants still live on under these assumed names.

But here's the important part of the story, which is that does he do this at age 20? Does he do this before he gets married? Because of course we think about what it would mean not just not be able to fulfill his father's work, but cutting off the patriline, cutting off the line of descent so there's no ancestors. I wonder if he would have been so ready to accept the emperor's rather extraordinary severance package for this position if he knew that was going to have ramifications down the ancestral line.

And the other thing is that at age 45, he actually talks about this in his letter to Ren An, his parents are both deceased. They won't see his degradation. They won't see his humiliation. And I wonder if that maybe helps him as well. It's obviously considered to be an enormous sacrifice, this incredible act of selflessness in pursuit of a higher goal. But the circumstances do matter a little bit. I don't know if we always talk about that in relation to his decision.

Alexander: Well, that's so fascinating. At 45, a castration could be a death sentence. It very easily could be an infected wound. This is 99 BCE we're still talking about.

Jeremiah Jenne: If you're listening to this in your car, do not worry. Alexander and I are not about to go on to a 10 minute discourse on how people were castrated in 100 BC China. As fascinating as that would be.

Alexander: I was about to go there actually, it's good you moved on.

Jeremiah Jenne: But what I would like to talk about though, in the time we have left is there's a lot of inspiration we could take from Sima Qian's story itself, but also the histories that he compiled, the stories of harsh officials, of the emperor's male favorites, of wandering knights, of the noble houses. In these stories that he collects, in these stories that he relates to us in the present, down through the ages, contains some of the cultural touchstones that have spawned cliches, they spawned whole mythologies of their own.

There's a great chengyu, right? Zhilu Weima 指鹿为马, calling a deer a horse. This comes from a story in Sima Qian's histories where I believe it's the second emperor of the Qin dynasty. His officials test the loyalty of the other officials by bringing a deer to the emperor and they call it a horse. And some of the officials stay silent. Some say, "Yeah, absolutely, that's a horse." And then some people actually say, "No, no, no, that's a deer." And those who say it's a deer are the ones who are, of course, executed.

And so Sima Qian is aware, he's not just writing history. He's giving his history a moral fiber that makes it so fascinating and why it's so valuable to read. And I got to tell you, I may be in Europe right now, but I do watch the news and the idea of speaking truth to power and the way that some entities, people, officials, companies and corporations—looking at you, House of the Mouse—who seem very willing to submit to their own form of castration and the excuses that they use in the choices they make. I have to say it's made reading Sima Qian at this time a bit more poignant than it even usually is.

Alexander: You're a trained historian. And we talked earlier about how dumb it is to say the Chinese XYZ, the Chinese Spielberg, the Chinese Thucydides, whatever. Is Sima Qian taught in

American history programs as a mode of doing history? And what can we learn from how Sima Qian told history, especially in this day and age? Because that I find very interesting.

Jeremiah Jenne: Sure. I think there's some really great takeaways from Sima Qian not just in how he wrote his history, but how he compiled the information. By all accounts, by his account, he travels the empire going to archives, going to libraries, meeting with people who claim to have a particular book. He's collecting sources, he's checking sources, he's verifying sources the best that he's able. Is it modern historiography, modern methodology? I don't know. It's a very different era. He has a very different idea about what he's doing than say a modern historian or a historian in China today, historian in Europe or the US or anywhere in the world today.

But the methods that he's using, I think track very well with a lot of the methods that historians would use down from his time down to today. And I think also that the model he provided for historians in China, at the very least, the way his idea of how to compile history, how to organize history, how to tell stories influenced dynastic histories down to the 20th century.

So there's some real interesting connections, not just between then and today, but also some through lines that we can trace, at least in China. Outside of China, I think Sima Qian was one of those figures that how we study him in the West tracks with how we study China from the very earliest days of European Chinese contact with, "Hey, look, they've got a Thucydides too," to a much more sophisticated and nuanced idea that hey, look, ancient Greece had a Sima Qian.

I mean, this is almost a cliche unto itself, but hey, the classics are classics for a reason. The way history is written tells us a lot about what a society values in the past, but of course also in the present.

Alexander: It really does. But to return to your main point about spiritual castrations here in the United States when it comes to...

Jeremiah Jenne: Jimmy Kimmel got off easy.

Alexander: Well, Jimmy Kimmel... what's interesting though about Sima Qian, is it's not just that he told the truth in his writing, or didn't tell the truth when the story needed it. But he told, he never let the truth get in the way of a good history, which is more true than necessarily the facts.

But he actually, the reason he was castrated is not because of what he said in his history. Although that was of course controversial as well. It's cause he actually spoke out for his friend. And that's something that you don't really see as much, you know, after Jimmy Kimmel was pulled off the air by the FCC. A lot of these comedians like jokingly praise Trump and I get it. You're being sarcastic, but in fact, we don't live...

Like you see that in China all the time. People will sarcastically post things on Weibo, China's highly censored internet, praising the party after an event because they know if they say anything explicitly negative, it'll get taken down. But we live in the United States of America. You actually do have free speech and you, or in theory you do. And I think that preemptively

engaging in this sarcastic praise of the state as a way to defend yourself is not very Sima Qian of them. Let me put it that way.

Jeremiah Jenne: Well, it's interesting you bring up that connection between what he wrote, what he did and what happened to him. Because as you said, he's punished for speaking up at court. He's not punished really for what he's writing. Although it is worth noting that he's writing with the full understanding, particularly after his castration, that this is something that's not going to see the light of day in his lifetime. If ever he talks about taking this enormous body of work that his family's been working on for decades, hide it in a mountain, as a kind of metaphor for hide it away until the time is right.

But at the same time, there's a lot of these stories do talk about cosmic consequences of poor leadership. And Sima Qian is not the first Chinese writer, thinker to talk about the mandate of heaven. This goes back quite a ways, obviously Mencius is the most famously articulates this, but this is an idea that had been part of the political DNA.

But it is interesting how often it comes up in his histories that he makes a point of the last Shang ruler, arrogant, corrupt, drunken, debauched, disrespected all the spirits and gods except for the spirit of wine, of which he made an entire lake of wine. It's like Secretary of Defense Pete's personal Pentagon play palace. But the difference of course in Sima Qian's time is that inevitably, there are consequences for moral failures. There's dynastic collapse, there's cosmic judgment, there's disasters, there's rebellions, all the good things from the, if you believe in the long arc of history, all the good things that happened to bad people.

And I got to tell you that in this particular timeline that you and I are living in and talking in right now, the kind of quaint notion that bad rule, that bad rulers get cosmically smacked down by some grand universal order just feels like an enormous syringe of copium jammed directly into the jugular at an upward angle. I wish I had Sima Qian's faith in heaven. I do not.

Alexander: I published another essay recently a few months ago on the Chinese concept of Tianxia, all under heaven, as like an organizing principle of international relations. But it's based on actually something from Sima Qian, this new book, and it refers to one of Sima Qian's lines about the Qin Empire having lost its stag. It's Mandate of Heaven embodied in the character of a stag and then all the other states going on the hunt for it.

And, you know, with this idea of losing that stag, losing your mandate of heaven, having this bad leader, I do wonder if some of what we see today is like global instability is really just the fact that we have a mad emperor who has lost the stag and the chase is on. So, you know, although we're not seeing him smack down here in America, you know, obviously, I'd say his powers are probably at their maximum ever. He's just outlawed Tylenol because Amish people don't have autism, according to him.

Sometimes if we're not seeing the Emperor at his deer pavilion, his wine lake, and if we're not soon to see us drowning in it.

Jeremiah Jenne: I think given the teetotaling nature of the U.S. president, I think it's more build a castle of Big Macs, but I get your point. I think the way I might sum it up would be that the one thing Sima Qian did believe was that eventually the histories, the stories, the moral import of what he was chronicling would have value, but it might not be in his time.

It was a garden that he was planting that he may never see in its full bloom. And he was not only okay with that, but he was willing to make enormous sacrifices just to make that a reality. Even if he never got credit, even if he wasn't there to see it. And the idea that sure, we know Han Wudi today because he's of course a very famous emperor. It's one of the most famous emperors in Chinese history, but I wonder what Han Wudi would think when he knows that Sima Qian gets almost as much public... almost if not an equal amount of attention in Chinese history this guy who was in charge of the Imperial Ouija board, the guy that we castrated, the guy that we mocked, the guy that we debased.

And yet here we are in 2025 and we're talking about the two of them at the same time. One because he was all about power and the exercise of power. The other one because he was all about standing up to power and recording that which he thought was right, regardless of the consequences. And that I should think has a power all its own.

Alexander: I would say so as well. I think, you know, it's my favorite part of these archive columns, you know, while researching for the article and getting some images for it, I found this woodblock printing of it...

Jeremiah Jenne: Please tell me you weren't like in the office Googling genital mutilation because if so...

Alexander: I was, that was... Alec shut those down. Originally I was going to have a detailed diagram and they're like, "No, hold here, slice there." But we had these woodblock printings and I was like, you know, we have all this new technology that's actually maintaining and transferring Shiji's... the Shiji from in the Song it was printing today it's podcasts, you know, I shudder to imagine what it will be in the future and the moral of the story is if you just write a world historical level book it will live on no matter what happens to you.

Jeremiah Jenne: Well, thank you, Alexander, for joining us today. We'll be back next month with our next installment in the China Archives column. I actually have the book right here. I have an actual hard copy this time. It's From Heaven Lake travels through, as it's spelled here, Xinjiang and Tibet by the Indian novelist and poet Vikram Seth. There's all kinds of things here that would make this book absolutely unsuitable for my carry-on bag to Beijing, but it's making for a fascinating read and I look forward to sharing it with everybody next month. Well, Alexander, have a great rest of your day.

Alexander: Thank you so much, I will. Here in the capital. Sounds great, thank you so much, Jeremiah.

Jeremiah Jenne: And if you speak truth to power, wear a cup.