

Early Historiography and Exegesis – Introduction –

Achim Mittag (Tübingen)

The following four papers were presented and discussed on the Panel “Early Historiography and Exegesis” of the XV EACS Conference, which took place in Heidelberg, August 25–29, 2004. The initiative to organize this panel originated with Dorothee Schaab-Hanke, with the other three “partners-in-crime” – Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, Hans van Ess, and Yuri Pines – joining promptly.

It is a great honour to be asked to act as a panel’s discussant, all the more so on a panel devoted to a topic to which oneself is committed heart and soul. Yet at the same time it always turns out to be a truly challenging task to highlight each paper in a competent and just manner, to bring the different approaches in line, and to find the running thread – a task too big to be accomplished *en passant*. Thus, time-squeezed as ever, all I can do now is make some random remarks on each paper and on one or two questions that have arisen from them.

To begin with, all four papers are in some way or the other centered around the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Scribe), the greatest masterwork of early Chinese historiography. In the recent fifteen years, research literature on the *Shiji* has been burgeoning. Nevertheless, the chapters selected here have rarely been subjected to so meticulous in-depth investigations as in the four papers presented in this panel round. These chapters comprise the “Basic Annals of Qin” (“Qin benji” – ch. 5), alongside with the preface to the “Annual Tables of the Six States” (“Liuguo nianbiao” – ch. 15; Yuri Pines) and three chapters of the “Treatises” (*shu*) part, namely the one on the calendar (“Lishu” – ch. 26; Dorothee Schaab-Hanke), the one on music (“Yueshu” – ch. 24; Hans van Ess), and the one on the Yellow River and other waterways (“Hequ shu” – ch. 29; Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann). Attaining mastery in the writing of treatises was traditionally regarded as the most difficult undertaking in history-writing.¹ In addition, treatises pose a painstaking task for the modern translator, which even so experienced translators as Burton Watson have not been too keen to tackle.²

For their analyses all four contributors have made use of an array of additional sources: Yuri Pines of recent archaeological findings, especially epigraphic findings, relating to the state of Qin in the pre-imperial period; Dorothee Schaab-Hanke of the full scope of texts which were part and parcel of the tradition of the scribes; Hans van Ess of the second “dynastic history”, Ban Gu’s (AD 32–92) *Hanshu*, and the “classical” treatise on music, the “Yueji” (Record of Music) contained in the *Liji* (Records of Rites), and Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann of the various geographical accounts of early China, in particular the *Shanhai jing* (Book of Mountains and Seas) and the “Yugong” (Tributes to Yu).

The four contributors have approached the panel’s larger topic – the relationship between historiography and exegesis – each in a quite different manner, yet all of them seem to take

1 Ever since Zheng Qiao (1104–1162) this view has been attributed to the Liang dynasty *literatus* Jiang Yan (444–505), but in fact this attribution cannot be verified. For Zheng’s claim, see his “*Tongzhi zongxu*,” in *Tongzhi* (Taipei: Xinxing shudian, 1965; repr. from the Shitong edition, Shanghai: Shangwu, 1936), 2ab, 10 f.

2 Burton Watson, “The Shih Chi and I,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, 12 (1995), 199–206.

“exegesis” in a broader sense, in the sense of consciously and sometimes critically relating to other texts and thus contributing to an on-going discourse. Understood in this way, “exegesis” is a technique that inaugurated a new dimension to the Chinese culture of script and writing, a technique which Jan Assmann has discussed by the term of hypolepsis; “hypolepsis” meaning “the principle of not starting anew from the beginning but rather, by way of reference, joining in what had been going on and thereby entering into a continuous communicative process”.³ As Assmann argues, hypolepsis is the essential moving force behind any culture’s transformation from “ritual” to “textual coherence”.⁴

Yuri Pines sets out to take the *Shiji* to test on its “reliability” and “intellectual integrity” by juxtaposing its presentation of the pre-imperial state of Qin with recent archaeological findings. Although finding that the *Shiji* abounds with “biased” views, Yuri Pines points out that these biases do not derive from a deliberately manipulative mind but rather from Sima Qian’s grappling with the sources at his disposal. Concluding his discussion, Yuri Pines shows that amongst these sources there were records which, for specific purposes, had obviously been manufactured and manipulated in the court of Qin.

In her analysis of the historical survey of calendar-making given at the outset of the “Treatise on the Calendar”, Dorothee Schaab-Hanke carefully traces the elements of the patchwork-like fabric back to earlier texts which emphasize the crucial role of calendar-making for a good government and the endurance of the state. In the light of her acute analysis, the survey turns out to be a masterpiece of the Grand Scribe’s exegetical efforts, which were intended to show his own expertise in calendar-making and recording calendrical events. As Dorothee Schaab-Hanke argues, we must assume that this essay-like survey as well as the appended model calendar calculation was not the work of Sima Qian (ca. 145 – 90/85 BC) but rather that of his father Sima Tan (d. 110 BC).

Hans van Ess re-assesses the question of authenticity to which the “Treatise of Music” contained in the *Shiji* has been subjected ever since a third-century commentator’s note. The inquiry proceeds in two steps: In the first step, Hans van Ess shows that the historical introduction given in the “Treatise’s” first part, in contrast to the parallel version in *Hanshu*, does not refrain from criticizing the present emperor Wudi (r. 141–87 BC). In the second step, Hans van Ess demonstrates that the theoretical dissertation from the second part of the “Treatise”, which is a differently arranged version of the “Yueji”, is compiled in a way that it neatly dovetails with the historical introduction. Hence, the “Treatise of Music” as a whole is a tight-knitted text, the intention of which, as Hans van Ess surmises, laid in disparaging His Majesty.

Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann inquires into both the *Shiji*’s and the *Hanshu*’s treatments of the location of the Yellow River source, in order to show how the two dynastic histories gave authority to the “Yugong” chapter from the *Shangshu* (Book of Documents), while devalorizing the *Shanbai jing*. Not considered part of the Confucian canon, the *Shanbai jing* henceforth came to be regarded as a doubtful and unreliable source of geographical knowledge.

On re-reading the four papers I was truly amazed by the four researchers’ penetrating analyses and their acuteness of argumentation, which seems to signal a new stage in Western *Shiji* scholarship. At the same time, however, I was also somehow puzzled; my puzzlement

3 Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: Beck, 21999), 282–283 (my own translation).

4 *Ibid.*, p. 291.

possibly deriving from the fact that the *Shiji* is such a landmark monument that any visit of it will give rise to ever new impressions which enrich our perceptions. At the end of the day we will be left with a plethora of divergent and sometimes even conflicting views.

Take for example the issue of the *Shiji*'s authorship(s): Whereas two contributors do not question the common assumption of Sima Qian as being the *Shiji*'s author (Yuri Pines; Vera Dorofeeva Lichtmann), one paper (Hans van Ess) intends to prove that one chapter usually considered spurious may have after all been originating with Sima Qian or his early successors, and finally another paper (Dorothee Schaab-Hanke) seeks to establish a distinction of two authorial voices attributed to Sima Qian and his father Sima Tan.

Besides: What were the truth claims of these historiographic “professionals” – calendar makers, astronomers, astrologers, scribes – to which, according to Dorothee Schaab-Hanke, father and son Sima orientated themselves? Were they different from those who, as Yuri Pines believes, manufactured and manipulated the historical records of Qin? Further: Must Sima Qian be seen as an agency of the imperial ideology, which is suggested by Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann's study of the *Shiji*'s insistence on the “orthodox” “Yugong” geography? Or shall we believe that the *Shiji* is full of examples of *lèse majesté*, as Hans van Ess tells us? Finally: If Sima Qian included the Taichu model calendar in the “Treatise on the Calendar” to keep the memory of his father, as Dorothee Schaab-Hanke concludes from her analysis, then can we really accept Yuri Pines' conclusion that there is no “justification to accuse Sima Qian of deliberate manipulations”?

The above remarks are not intended to, indeed cannot detract from the richness of the four papers' contribution to the adventure of reading the *Shiji* with new excitement.