

# The Date of Termination of the Shih Chi

By Pan Chung-kwei

(Hongkong)

The *Shih Chi* is one of the greatest masterpieces of both Chinese literature and history. All know that this work is the history of events happening throughout the 2600 years — from the Huang Emperor until Emperor Wu of Western Han — as recorded by Ssu-ma Ch'ien. However, in which year of Emperor Wu's reign was the work actually brought to completion? This problem still has not yet been solved by the scholars who have devoted themselves to the study of the *Shih Chi*. The answer to this question intimately affects the length of time the original is said to cover and the authenticity of some of its contents. For this reason I have sifted through the theories of previous scholars and the results of my own research in the hope of obtaining a clear and reliable solution to this important problem.

The scholar, LIANG Ch'i-ch'ao, brought up this problem discussing it in detail in his book *Analysis and Reading of the Shih Chi*. I quote:

"In which year was the *Shih Chi* terminated? In the preface (of the *Shih Chi*) the author says, I relate this history in the hope that those of future generations will know of the times from Yao and Shun till the time of the *Lin*\*. The commentary of P'ei Yin<sup>[1]</sup> explains further. CHANG Yen<sup>[2]</sup> makes this comment, 'Emperor Wu hunted and captured a *Lin* which Ssu-ma Ch'ien took to be the sign of completion of his great narrative which covered history from the Huang Emperor till the *Lin*, just like Confucius' ending the *Spring and Autumn Annals* when a *Lin* was once caught. It says furthermore in the Biography of Yang Hsiung in the Book of Han, 'Ssu-ma Ch'ien's recording of the Six States took in Ch'u and Han, ending with the *Lin*.' Again, the Biography of Pan Piao<sup>[3]</sup> in the Book of Later Han states, 'Ssu-ma Ch'ien wrote a history covering the time from the Huang Emperor till the capturing of the *Lin* totalling 130 Chapters'. Having thus seeing what Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Yang Hsiung and Pan Ku have said (the Biography of Yang Hsiung was drawn from what he actually wrote and the Biography of Pan Piao from what his son, Pan Ku<sup>[4]</sup> wrote), the meaning of 'until the time of the *Lin*' is unquestionable. Emperor Wu captured a *Lin* in the winter of the tenth month of the first year of the Yüan-shou<sup>[5]</sup> Period (122 B.C.). His predecessor, Confucius, terminated his historical masterpiece, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*,

---

\* The *Lin* is a wild animal now extinct. It was very rare and believed to be an auspicious omen. Superstition and fiction have turned it to a fantastic beast, like (though not in appearance) the Greek unicorn.

in the fourteenth year of Duke Ai of Lu<sup>[6]</sup> when the latter caught a *Lin* in the western countries. The author of the *Shih Chi* has merely imitated him, for by coincidence, Emperor Wu also caught a *Lin* when the *Shih Chi* was nearing completion. Therefore this must be the date of completion and the Biography of Emperor Wu also terminates in October of the first year Yüan-shou, as well as the Historical Tables, and all the other biographies. All the records after this date are not part of the original. This standard seems to be the most trustworthy in judging the authenticity of certain sections. However, there are quite a large number of records of events after this date, as well as numerous conflicting theories about fixing the date of completion. These are as follows:

(1) Completed during the reign of T'ai-ch'ü<sup>[7]</sup>. In the last section of the Preface, the author says, I relate history from the time of the Huang Emperor till the T'ai-ch'ü period. Also the Book of Han states about Ssu-ma Ch'ien, 'nothing is recorded after the T'ai-ch'ü reign period'. This reign lasted for four years. If it was terminated within the T'ai-ch'ü reign that would make the date 101 B.C., then this is 22 years later than the *Lin* date.

(2) Completed during the reign of T'ien-han<sup>[8]</sup>. The Biography of Ssu-ma Ch'ien in the Book of Han states 'he related of the times of Ch'u and Han<sup>[9]</sup> until the T'ien-han reign'. The *Shih Chi So Yin*<sup>[10]</sup> and *Cheng Yi*<sup>[11]</sup> commentary to the *Shih Chi* also support this theory. The T'ien-han period came just after the T'ai-ch'ü and also lasted for four years. If it was completed in the fourth year of T'ien-han (97 B.C.), then this is 26 years later than the *Lin* date.

(3) Completed during the later years of Emperor Wu: In the appendix to the Time tables of the feudal lords coming after the Chien-yüan reign<sup>[12]</sup> there is the quotation, 'Master Ch'ü<sup>[13]</sup> said, Ssu-ma Ch'ien finished his work in the last year of Emperor Wu'. The last year of Emperor Wu was the second year of Hou-yüan<sup>[14]</sup> (87 B.C.). If it was completed in this year, then this is 36 years later than the *Lin* date.

The second and third theories above can be discounted as they are based on questions from authors coming after Ssu-ma Ch'ien. Only the first theory, like the *Lin* date theory, is actually supported by the Preface. Such a contradiction in the same piece is indeed confusing. A closer look reveals that the phrase 'ending with *Lin*' occurs in the main text of the Preface, while the phrase 'completed some time during the T'ai-ch'ü reign period' appears in a later sentence near the end of the minor Preface, the style of writing being quite inferior. The Book of Han quotes the Preface in its entirety, yet does not mention this line as if it was not in the original text as Pan Ku saw it. Considering also Ssu-ma Ch'ien's desire to imitate Confucius, I definitely accept until *Lin* (i.e. until the time Emperor Wu caught a *Lin*) as the proper date."

[6] 魯哀公 [7] 太初 [8] 天漢 [9] 楚, 漢 [10] 史記索隱  
[11] 史記正義 [12] 建元以來侯者年表 [13] 褚先生 [14] 後元

Liang Ch'i-ch'ao has figured out that there are four different theories as to the date of completion of the records in the *Shih Chi*. Since all four theories place the date within the reign of Emperor Wu of Han and readers have accepted them without much reflection, they have not given rise to any serious debate. Then Liang Ch'i-ch'ao intended to ascertain the date as being in one particular year. In actual fact, there is enough room for only one of the four theories. He got rid of the latter two which were those of scholars after the time of Ssu-ma Ch'ien, with almost a wave of the hand. The two remaining theories, the T'ai-ch'u and Yüan-shou ones, were taken to be strictly from the pen of Ssu-ma Ch'ien himself. In the end, he fixed the Yüan-shou date (i.e. the *Lin* date) as the true one, disposing of the T'ai-ch'u theory by maintaining that it was not part of the original text, but instead, a mistake in revision made by later scholars. If one accepts this explanation, then all records and other contents coming after the first year of Yüan-shou are either forgeries or mistakes made in revising the book. Under these circumstances, the whole appearance of the *Shih Chi* immediately undergoes quite a change. Although previous scholars who supported the T'ai-ch'u theory, such as CHAO Ou-pei, LIANG Yu-sheng and even WANG Kuo-wei of our era, certainly did not accept the Yüan-shou Theory, they could not completely overthrow the so called "conclusive evidence" of the latter. Thus each school of thought went its own way, and the world of learning has not yet obtained a unanimously accepted solution. On going over the fruits of my research, I have discovered that the "conclusive evidence" on which Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's supposition rests, really has not two legs to stand on. We find the text of this "conclusive evidence" in the author's preface to the last chapter:

"I relate from the time of Yao and Shun till the time of *Lin*, starting from the Huang Emperor."

On closer inspection, we notice several points about this quotation.

1. Ssu-ma Ch'ien certainly has not mentioned whether or not he terminated his work in the year in which Emperor Wu caught a *Lin*. The explanation of the above quotation is merely the deduction of later scholars. Indeed, it is doing just what Liang Ch'i-ch'ao himself criticizes of others' proofs — it "comes from the mouths of later writers". So this supposed interpretation certainly cannot be considered as strong evidence.

2. If we follow along the lines of Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's theory about Emperor Wu capturing a *Lin*, then the above quotation is rendered nonsensical; for it clearly says, "I relate from the times of Yao and Shun till the time of *Lin*, starting from the Huang Emperor". Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's translation of it would run something like: "I relate history from the times of Yao and Shun and end with the year in which Emperor Wu caught a *Lin*, starting from the Huang Emperor (appr. 2700 B.C., long before the time of Yao and Shun)." If Ssu-ma Ch'ien had wanted to tell us the date with which the *Shih Chi* begins and ends then it would have been far simpler and clearer to say, "I record from the times of the Huang Emperor until the year Emperor Wu of Han caught a *Lin*." But just saying "... from the time of Yao and Shun till the *Lin*" then tacking on the phrase "starting from the Huang

Emperor" is just like adding more ribbons to Aunt Agatha's pet horse. Not only is it bad language but also almost ridiculous. How could such a literary genius as Ssu-ma Ch'ien write such nonsense? Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's school of thought released this, so they insisted that the phrase, "from the Huang Emperor onwards," was added mistakenly by later scholars (see Ts'ü Shih's treatise on the *Shih Chi*<sup>[15]</sup>). This kind of baseless subjective judgement can be said completely to contradict the objective spirit in which research should be carried out.

3. The following sentence is to be found in the last chapter of the author's preface, "I began my records from the time of the Huang Emperor until the T'ai-ch'ü reign altogether covering 130 chapters". This is Ssu-ma Ch'ien's clearest record of the dates on which the *Shih Chi* was to commence and end. But since Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's school believes in the Yüan-shou theory, it rashly maintains that the above sentence was not in the original. Actually, from the Northern Sung block impression onwards, the original has contained this sentence. As for the argument that Ssu-ma Chien's biography in the book of Han did not quote the above sentence, this is merely due to the fact that the Book of Han quite frequently spliced sections of the author's preface. For instance the author's prologue to each of the 130 chapters (with the exception of that to the last chapter) have been completely cut out, and even in the last chapter whole sections have been done away with. It is illogical to suppose that the second-hand version of a work is original, and is the most dangerous limit to which one can go in culling evidence. In this light, Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's denial of the T'ai-ch'ü theory cannot justify itself and so is not worth our adherence.

4. If we read over carefully the quotation, ". . . so I relate history from Yao and Shun till the *Lin*, beginning with the Huang Emperor", we can say with some certainty that previous scholars have missed Ssu-ma Ch'ien's real meaning and that Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's reading his own mistaken interpretation into the original became the root of all trouble. We know that in writing the *Shih Chi*, Ssu-ma Ch'ien wanted to continue in the same spirit in which Confucius edited the *Book of History* and compiled the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. This is made quite clear in a section of the author's preface and is one point upon which all readers of the *Shih Chi* agree. After explaining that he intends to carry on in the tradition of Confucius' editing the six Classics, Ssu-ma Ch'ien goes on. "So in the end I wish to carry on from Yao and Shun till *Lin*" means that he wishes to draw on the spirit and material of Confucius; and beginning with the time of the Huang Emperor. Taking the quotation word for word: the word *Shu*<sup>[16]</sup> means "tell", as in "tell a story" or "recount past events". The phrase ". . . from Yao and Shun" is like the extract from the Biography of Five Emperors which says, "The Book of History only recounts from the time of Yao", and so the former phrase represents "the Book of History". The rest of the phrase, "until the *Lin*" refers to Confucius' completing the *Spring and Autumn Annals* when the Duke Ai of Lu caught a *Lin*, and so *Lin* can represent the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

[15] 崔適史記探源 [16] 述

In this way, the entire sentence "... recount from Yao and Shun till the *Lin*" means that he desires to continue in the vein of the *Book of History* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and write the *Shih Chi* which dates from the Huang Emperor. He does not say directly, "I wish to recount in the same vein as the Classics of the sage Confucius" but instead the above. This is a subtlety in Ssu-ma Chien's part, to bring to mind what one has recklessly forgotten. On understanding the full significance of this quotation we see that the theory which says that the *Shih Chi* was terminated in the first year of the Yuan-shou reign cannot carry much weight. Furthermore, the new explanation does not conflict in the least with the phrase quoted earlier from the last section: "... I recount history as happening between the time of the Huang Emperor and the T'ai-Ch'u reign." In the former quotation, the author merely says that he desires to continue the history of a former sage in writing the *Shih Chi* which is to begin with the Huang Emperor. He did not bother to state where it was to end. Then it is not until the last chapter that he concludes what he began to say, "... until the T'ai-ch'u reign period". So the work quite clearly begins with the Huang Emperor and ends with the T'ai-ch'u reign period. These are the times stated by the author himself for the beginning and conclusion of the *Shih Chi*; this is the most reliable, obvious and straight forward evidence we have for fixing the dates. What the school of Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Ts'ui Shih persistently maintain about these phrases being added on by later scholars is totally without reliable proof.

Their deduction that Ssu-ma Ch'ien intended to imitate Confucius in ending his book during a year in which a *Lin* was captured is indeed taking a very superficial view of the matter. It was the spirit of Confucius that he desired to imitate and this is expressed throughout the entire *Shih Chi*. He certainly would not lower himself to go in for more plagiarism and meaningless imitation as Liu Chih-chi<sup>[17]</sup> scornfully put it, "although the appearance is the same, the mind is different". Once we understand Ssu-ma Ch'ien's real meaning, we know that it is an indisputable fact that the year of conclusion was somewhere during the T'ai-ch'u reign period of Emperor Wu.

---

[17] 劉知幾