

“Awaiting The Wise of a Future Generation”: On the Rhetoric of Treason in the *Shiji*

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The rhetorical device I chose for analysis in my paper is that of allusion. More specifically, my focus lies on the rhetorical and political function of altogether five text passages in the *Shiji* (The Scribe’s Record), a text that was probably finalized around the year 86 BCE. The “author of the *Shiji*” – please allow me that I postpone the tricky question of authorship to the *Shiji* a bit here – in each of these passages addresses as his readers wise men of a future generation of whom he hoped that they will prove worthy to make use of the work that he had compiled and left for posterity. Closer examination reveals that these five text passages all allude to one passage of the *Gongyang zhuan*, one of the three earliest texts that interpreted the *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn) annals, a by its very nature rather terse chronicle of the state of Lu, spanning the years from 721 to 481 BCE.

In my written paper, I have discussed three major topics. In my short presentation I will highlight them first and then discuss them in a summarized form.

First, if one reads the five passages in the *Shiji* in which the historiographer alludes to the here relevant passage of the *Gongyang zhuan* in the context of the chapters in which they are contained and if one relates the conclusions to be drawn from these chapters to each other, various facets of an overall political message become discernible, namely a rather critical assessment of Emperor Wu (r. 141–87), the emperor during whose reign Sima Tan (who lived until 110 BCE) and Sima Qian (who died around the year 86 BCE) had successively served as court astronomers, astrologers, calendar makers, and historiographers.

Second, the rhetorical advice of allusion to the *Gongyang zhuan* used by the *Shiji* author will be scrutinized in terms of what I decided to call a “rhetoric of treason” here. As I have argued in my written paper, the “treason” traced here is not all at once visible, at least not for an untrained reader, but it is rather an implicit, or an implied treason. This implied treason is something that can already be sensed in the text of the *Gongyang zhuan*, and is again applied on politics within the exegetical tradition of the *Gongyang zhuan* by the Han scholar and exegete Dong Zhongshu (c.179–c.115 BCE).

Third, I have argued that the very decision to use the rhetorical device of alluding to the *Gongyang zhuan* for several reasons points towards one among the main two authors of the *Shiji*, namely to Sima Qian rather than his father Tan. It seems thus that Sima Qian – whether intended or unintended – left his personal signature by the very way he decided to convey his political message to readers of a later generation.

The passage of the *Gongyang zhuan* which is at the focus of interest here is found in the last section of the transmitted text. Commenting on the *Chunqiu* entry related to the 14th year of Duke Ai of the state of Lu (481 BCE.) where it is recorded that a unicorn had been caught during a hunt somewhere in the West, the author of the *Gongyang zhuan* asks for which reason this record was made in the *Chunqiu*. – For those who wish to read the exact wording along with my summary, I have provided the relevant passages in Chinese and English rendering on overhead. –

Upon hearing of the capture of the unicorn, Confucius is reported to have reacted rather emotionally, asking himself for whom this auspicious animal had come right now, and to have exclaimed: “My way has come to an end!” Upon this, the author of the *Gongyang zhuan* reflects on the question why the “superior man” (i.e. Confucius) has made the *Chunqiu*. While the author of the *Gongyang zhuan* in his interpretation seems to hesitate about what may have been the primary motivating force for Confucius to have compiled the *Chunqiu*, in his final statement he turns his attention away from the age in which Confucius lived toward the sages and superior men of a time somewhere in the future, and he comes to the reconciling conclusion:

“(…) Indeed, he (= Confucius) applied the moral rules of the *Spring and Autumn* (annals) to await the sages of a future age; it was for superior men that (this work) was made, and this is also something that he took his delight in!”

Apart from the *Gongyang zhuan*, both the *Zuozhuan* and the *Guliang zhuan* also comment on the event recorded in the *Chunqiu* for the 14th year of Duke Ai of Lu. While the author of the *Zuozhuan* only briefly reports on the incident, explaining that it was the driver of a carriage who had discovered the animal, that he was fearing that it could be inauspicious and that it was then brought to Confucius who identified it to be a unicorn, the author of the *Guliang zhuan* confines himself to explaining that a unicorn was an auspicious animal. But it is the author of the

Gongyang zhuan who not only devotes most attention on the event of the capture of the unicorn, but who was also the only one to reflect on the relation between the appearance of the unicorn and the suggested impact of this event on Confucius and his working on the *Chunqiu* text.

Let us now take a look at the five passages in the *Shiji* that contain allusions to the above mentioned passage in the *Gongyang zhuan* and the way they are formulated there. Listed according to the sequence of chapters in the *Shiji* these passages are contained in chapters 12, 15, 18, 28 and 130 of the transmitted text. Importantly, each of these passages is part of the *Taishigong yue* (“His Honor the Grand Scribe said”) section, i.e, the allusion is part of the historiographer’s personal remarks, as they are usually found at the end of a given chapter.

To begin with Chap. 12, “Annals of the Present Emperor”: The striking fact about this chapter is that it has an almost doublet in Chap. 28, “Monograph on the Feng and Shan sacrifices”. More precisely, Chap. 12 has only about 60 characters added to the text contained in Chap. 28, consisting of a short genealogical introduction devoted to Liu Chi, posthumously called Emperor Wu of the Han. Chap. 28 which on a whole comprises more than double the size of pages than Chap. 12, sets out with a short essay on the overriding importance that rulers since antiquity attached to the sacrifices conducted on Mount Tai. Upon this follows a detailed historical survey on all those rulers from antiquity down to the Han dynasty who had proceeded to conduct the sacrifices, and in each case it is recorded whether by doing so their qualification as worthy rulers was confirmed or rather dismissed by Heaven. From the beginning of the record concerning emperor Wu until the historiographer’s personal comment, the text in Chap. 28 is identical with that of Chap. 12, with one exception: According to the personal comment in Chap.12, the historiographer writes that when he had accompanied the emperor on his journey to the holy site of Mount Tai to sacrifice Heaven, he had the opportunity to examine the “words” (*yan*) of the magicians and the sacrificial officials; in contrast, according to the account in chap. 28, he writes that he had opportunity to examine the “intention” (*yi*) of these specialists.

While some *Shiji* specialists have maintained that the original content of the chapter had been lost and was later replaced by most of chapter 28, I have argued already in a previous paper that the almost doublet of Chapters 12 and 28 was intended by the *Shiji* author. At first sight, the suspiciously disproportionate treatment of the

sacrifices as the major event in the Annals of Emperor Wu in chap. 12, and again the large amount of space devoted to Emperor Wu and his proceedings to Mount Tai in Chap. 28, may seem strange. However, given that the doublet was intentional, the emphasis laid on the question of how the sacrifices conducted by Emperor Wu should be evaluated in terms of his worthiness, suggests that the historiographer wanted to emphasize the importance of this special event to his reader. And if one interprets the just mentioned replacement of the word *yan* (words) in Chap. 12 by *yi* (intentions/ meaning) in Chap. 28 also as a hidden message contrasting what these specialists alleged to do against what their real intentions were, very much in accordance with the statement concerning “both the outside and the inside of these affairs” (*ju jian qi biao li*), then the idea of placing two almost identical texts within one and the same work can likewise be interpreted as part of an overall evaluation program which in the end reveals the historiographer’s rather critical assessment of Emperor Wu.

In chapter 15, “Table By Years of the Six (Feudal) States”, the key term in what the historiographer wants to alert his potential reader in reading this table of is certainly the expression “beginnings of rise and decay” (*xinghuai zhi duan*). To put it differently, the table which traces the history of the state of Qin from its beginnings over his swallowing of one state after the other until the unification of the empire until its final downfall after merely 15 years, should be read as an example for the causative mechanisms behind the rise and decay of a dynasty. Indeed, the historiographer’s sensitivity for tracing tendencies to arrogance and hubris even from the tiniest beginnings of the development of this state can be felt from certain derogatory terms he uses to describe the behavior of the earliest rulers of the young state of Qin. And, as can be suggested from statements in several parts of the *Shiji*, and as others, such as .e.g., Steve Durrant, have already earlier suggested, the historiographer’s treatment of the development of the state of the Qin is certainly meant, in the very first place, as a warning example for the emperor of the Han.

As regards chapter 18, “Table By Years of the Meritful Ministers and Feudal Lords”, any attentive reader would have to make a thorough analysis of the entries in this table first before he would be able to draw any conclusions from it. Of altogether 143 nobilities that the founder of the Han dynasty, Gaozu, had bestowed upon meritorious officials, mostly in the first years of his reign, the number of nobilities closed in the reignal times of the emperors succeeding him down to Emperor Wu are meticulously recorded, along with the

reasons given for these closures. The *Shiji* author's remark that there was a "forest of interdictions" (*de shi zhi lin*) in his present age, becomes clearly visible if one traces the number of closures only during the reign of Emperor Wu and the reasons given for them: While in the roughly 150 years following the first enfeoffment of meritorious officials under Gaozu almost 50% of them, namely 70 nobilities, were still in the hand of the noble's descendants, in the 53 years of reign of Emperor Wu almost all remaining nobilities – with the exception of two – were closed, 65 of them in the first two thirds of Wudi's reign, and only four of them for reasons other than their being charged with crime. Remarkably, the year in which most of the persecutions took place was the year 112, and thus shortly before the emperor proceeded to conduct the Feng and Shan sacrifices on Mount Tai. It thus seems that again these sacrifices were at the focus of a special interest on the historiographer's part, and one might even assume that Wudi's imminent proceeding to Mount Tai had caused a certain nervousness in him that may have led to his desire to excise any possible danger that could have impeded a successful performance on Mount Tai.

As for the last allusion to the *Gongyang zhuan* that occurs in Chap. 130 of the *Shiji*, this allusion is the one which, from the very way of its being formulated, runs most closely parallel with the wording of the *Gongyang zhuan*. In both cases, the author ends by devoting his work to superior men of a coming age in an uncertain future. But there is still another parallel which concerns the position of the passage within the text. As mentioned before, the conclusion drawn by the author of the *Gongyang zhuan* that it was indeed Confucius' delight to devote his work on the *Chunqiu* to superior men of a later age is found at the end of the *Gongyang zhuan*, more precisely, it is the very last sentence of the work. The passage alluding to it in the *Shiji* is contained in the last sentence of the rhymed postface related to the last, the autobiographical chapter, of the *Shiji*. Thus the parallel is both an inward, content-related one and an outward, positional one.

As for the author's political message, what can clearly be concluded from all five *Shiji* passages is the historiographer's critical assessment of his emperor, Emperor Wu. But apart from this fairly openly expressed criticism, which could equally well be meant as a pedagogical one, expressed in the hope to encourage his ruler to change his way of governing and thus to fulfil the hopes that his supporters had pinned on him, the *Shiji* author's allusion to the *Gongyang zhuan* implies still another message which is a more veiled

form of criticism, namely that the author had already turned his attention away from his present age and toward a future age, more precisely, to superior men of such a future age, who would be able to use the lesson of the past and apply it on the ruler of their own age. In other words, the *Shiji* author had already lost any hope that the ruler of his own times would be open-minded enough to change his ways and might in the end still turn out to be the long expected sage ruler.

That someone displaying such an attitude, especially in an age of centralistic and ideologically constrained rule, would all too easily run the risk of being charged with having committed high treason is certainly close at hand, even though the historiographer himself would certainly explain his motivation as simply feeling uncompromisingly obliged to record the truth for the sake of the generations of scribes, ministers and rulers to come.

The *Shiji* author was, however, not the first to have made use of this kind of political “dynamite” that the author of the *Gongyang zhuan*, a certain Gongyang Gao, claimed to have taken from the very text of the *Spring and Autumn* annals, as it was taught by the Master, Confucius, himself. It had already been used by the Han scholar and exegete Dong Zhongshu who is known to have been endowed with a chair to teach students in his understanding of the *Spring and Autumn* by Emperor Wu himself. While generations of scholars have primarily emphasized that Dong Zhongshu was the one who had supported Emperor Wu in establishing Confucianism as a state ideology, it was Gary Arbuckle who, as far as I know, had first pointed out that Dong Zhongshu was also the first Confucian theorist to propagate an emperor’s abdication. As he argues in a study entitled “Inevitable treason: Dong Zhongshu’s Theory of Historical Cycles and Early Attempts to Invalidate the Han Mandate”, Dong Zhongshu had in fact tried to – I quote – “demonstrate that the Mandate through which the House of Han claimed the right to rule was in imminent danger of cancellation”. And he even goes so far as to say that the cycle of dynasties that Dong Zhongshu propagated in his teaching, implied “a death sentence on the Han, and treason on the part of the *Gongyang* school – although for them, it perhaps appeared no more than the elucidation of an inexorable and objectively valid process.”

Another, also very interesting remark by Sarah Queen should also be added here, since it was exactly the combination of Dong Zhongshu’s turning towards the future and his making use of of the *Spring and Autumn annals* for eschatological purposes which had effected what might be called here a “tradition of treason”. Queen

writes that an essential element of Dong Zhongshu as it can be suggested from the *Chunqiu fanlu* (Luxuriant Dew of *Spring and Autumn*”, a compilation he is credited with, was the emphasis laid on the prophetic power of the *Spring and Autumn* text. In her own words:

“(…) Perhaps in response to the great appeal that divination held for Emperor Wu, scholars like Dong Zhongshu emphasized the text’s prophetic powers. They argued that one divines the future not by means of tortoise shell, bone, or milfoil but rather through careful scrutiny of the past.”

The idea that the primary purpose of a careful examination of the past is to become able to presage the future is exactly one of the major motivating forces that we also find in the *Shiji*.

So far, I have intentionally avoided to name of either Sima Tan or Sima Qian but instead preferred to talk simply about the “author of the *Shiji*”, although it is by now largely acknowledged among *Shiji* specialists that both contributed – in some way or the other – to the compilation of the *Shiji*. Accepting the idea that the *Shiji* is a layered text to which both authors have contributed in a collaborative effort, it is precisely the exegetical approach I have focussed in this paper that helps, in my view, to add further evidence to the idea that – in spite of an overall trend towards producing a joint identity as “taishigong” (The Lord the Grand Scribe) – both authors also seem to have had some specific peculiarities for which they may be told from each other.

The fact that the *Shiji* author had personal knowledge not only of the teaching but also of the persona Dong Zhongshu is attested by the famous passage in the last *Shiji* chapter where the historiographer in the – albeit probably fictitious – dialogue with Hu Sui explicitly refers to words he had heard from the mouth of “Master” Dong, i.e. Dong Zhongshu. The address to someone as a *sheng* 生 (master) could mean that Dong Zhongshu was the *Shiji* author’s teacher, but it could equally well just be used as a designation for someone whose teaching one treats with respect. However, from the account in the autobiographical chapter of the *Shiji* on Sima Qian’s childhood and adolescence it becomes quite evident that he had laid much emphasis on providing his son Qian with a profound education in the Classics and their commentaries. Thus, already at the age of ten, as we learn from the autobiographical account, Sima

Qian was able to recite the ancient texts. As for his father Tan, Sima Qian informs his reader that he was trained primarily as a specialist for the heavens, i.e., as an astrologer and astronomer, and was thus certainly not as well-grounded in the art of Han text exegesis as his son Qian had the chance to.

From these hints at a difference as regards the education of Sima Tan and Sima Qian as well as from other factors that I have tried to approach in various studies on the *Shiji* as an exegetical work, we may infer that Sima Tan's attitude towards Emperor Wu was at least to some degree different from that of his son Qian in his very conception of the work. It seems that Sima Tan had conceived the whole work in the expectation that now, about 100 years after the rise of the Han, the long expected "Sage of the Han" should be about to rise. Very probably, he had expected Han Wudi to be this long expected worthy candidate. This was the reason why the preparations for the Feng and Shan sacrifices which only a worthy ruler would be able to conduct with a positive response from heaven's part were of so overriding importance to him. He died, however, shortly before the sacrifices on Mount Tai took place. His son Qian who, instead of his father Tan, accompanied Emperor Wu when he proceeded to Mount Tai, experienced the years after his father's death and had finally come to the conviction that this emperor was certainly not that long expected Sage of the Han.

It seems thus that in the *Shiji* we find the traces of two quite distinct ideological attitudes: that of someone who was imbued by a strong eschatological hope, and that of someone who apparently did not expect much of the present emperor any more and had decided to direct all his hopes toward the future, to readers of a future generation who might be able to peruse the *Shiji* to support a worthy ruler who would hopefully arise in that future age.

There is thus a further important conclusion to be drawn from the study conducted here: By using the rhetorical device of allusion to the *Gongyang zhuan*, one of the two major authors who contributed to the compilation of the *Shiji* text, namely Sima Qian, no matter whether intended or unintended seems to have left indeed some traces of his personal signature that allows us to identify him quite safely as the "traitor" among the two Sima.