

BOOK REVIEW

A Brief History of Ancient China

By Edward L. Shaughnessy. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.
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Edward Shaughnessy has made the bold move to model his latest general history of China on the five-part structure of Sima Qian's *Historical Records* (*Shiji*, compiled ca. 90 BCE). However, his failure to adhere to the aims and spirit of that model makes Shaughnessy's choice curious. That does not mean that his *A Brief History of Ancient China* necessarily fails the reader, but it leaves one wondering who are the target readers for this book, and what are they to make of it. Shaughnessy styles his own endeavor "dividing the history into numerous independent items that do not necessarily follow any logical sequence," although nothing so trendily post-modern could possibly reproduce what scholars have come to call Sima Qian's *hu jian fa* 互見法 (mutual illumination method), nor what Sima Qian aspired to: to create a specific defining form of historical expertise for all time (*cheng yijia zhi yan* 成一家之言). One recent book, Lei Yang's *Narrative Devices in the Shiji*, opines that Sima Qian forged logical connections "to an unprecedented degree."¹

As readers may recall, the *Shiji* consists of five parts: The "Basic Annals" detailing emperor's reigns; the "Tables" supplying the chronologies for major figures and events; the "Treatises" sketching the evolution of eight aspects of governing; the "Hereditary Houses" tracing the histories of the ruling lines in several leading pre-Han states; and the "Biographies" (individual and collective) analyzing the lives of leading men and women from the time of the Shang-Zhou transition until the reign of Han Wudi (r. 141–87 BCE). Readers who have not been deeply immersed in the *Shiji*, the Tables and Treatises of which were hailed as major innovations soon after the text entered circulation, may not pick up on the immense differences in contents and in style between Sima Qian's and Shaughnessy's histories written two millennia apart.² However, even English-only readers familiar with Burton Watson's *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China* (1975) cannot but be struck by the difference in rhetorical styles: whereas Sima Qian openly addresses the readers, demanding that they

¹Lei Yang, *Narrative Devices in the Shiji: Retelling the Past* (New York: SUNY Press, 2024), 51.

²Anyone familiar with the complexities of correlating of different pre-imperial calendars must be in awe. For another ancient world, see Denis Feeney's *Caesar's Calendar: Ancient Time and the Beginnings of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) and Christopher Cullen's impressive body of work, for the Han.

think hard, Shaughnessy adopts the third-person omniscient narrator style favored by Ban Gu, a sometime critic of Sima Qian. (Liu Zhiji's *Shitong*, begun 708, identified the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* as two of the six antique models for writing history, with the *Shiji* "in disuse" by his time and the *Hanshu* favored.)

If the truth be told, these days writing any brief history of ancient China (ca. 2000–207 BC, by Shaughnessy's periodization) takes daring, if only because of the ever-widening gap between scholarship in the Sinosphere and that conducted in Euro-American languages (mainly in English, French, and German) over the single political question: How early is "China" recognizably China, and when can we begin to speak of a cohesive "mainstream thought and culture" produced by fairly homogeneous "Chinese" ethnic groups? Here Shaughnessy fudges: he speaks of "the cultures that coalesced into Chinese civilization" (83), with no time specified for this coming together to form one mass or whole. In general, historians tend to emphasize ruptures in history, when the default "path dependence" (people's propensity to follow well-trodden courses) no longer serves in a crisis, and smaller communities, whereas some scholars trained in epigraphy, East Asian Languages, philosophy, and archaeology are apt to see continuities in a *long durée* trumping the abundant counter-evidence, in large part because of the continuous evolution in scripts (not languages). (Plainly, it is no accident that Shaughnessy, trained in the previous generation in works attributed to the Shang and Western Zhou, devotes treatises to oracle bone inscriptions (OBI) and bronze inscriptions, subjects in which Sima Qian evinced little interest.) David Hackett Fischer, in his classic *Historians' Fallacies*, cautions against tracing "origins and essences," believing these to be metaphysical issues not liable to proof or disproof.³ China's greatest historian, Sima Qian, would have merited Fischer's warm approval, as he shows us four watershed periods, with monumental cultural changes following in the wake of four discrete sets of events. Germane is one historical fact: it may seem incredible now, but when Shaughnessy finished his thesis under David Nivison at Stanford in 1983, there were precisely four places to train in pre-imperial history: Chicago, Stanford, Berkeley, and the University of Washington, where the experts were working mainly in Shang or Western Zhou. (In the late 1970s I had nowhere to train in the United States, if I intended to focus on Han history, as Yang Lien-sheng, nominally at Harvard, had been too ill to teach for roughly a decade by then.) Shaughnessy's topic was distinctly "metaphysical," by Hackett's reckoning, insofar as it delved into the composition, i.e., origins, of the *Book of Changes*. Attempting a brief history of early China also requires courage because the battle lines have been drawn between those who would insist upon the "secular" rather than "religious" impulses in China, despite the longstanding insight (attested by Nathan Sivin, Herbert Fingarette, and others) that the secular is the sacred when it comes to the multiple homologies in the pre-Buddhist world constructed between the realm and local domains, the ruler and ruled, and the cosmos. Shaughnessy has always fought Sivin and company.

The foregoing should make it plain that Shaughnessy and I inhabit entirely different mental worlds, and not only because I work principally in the early empires (roughly 323 BCE to 316 CE), where the field has more abundant evidence (whose significance is hotly contested, in many cases), whereas Shaughnessy has to hand relatively less evidence and that more limited in type: mainly the Shang and Zhou oracle bones

³David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (London: Routledge, 1970), 10–15, 29–33, 69–77, 95.

inscriptions (OBI) and bronze inscriptions that typically celebrate scions of a ruling line and its officers. So Shaughnessy can include, in the section he means as counterpart to Sima Qian's tables, maps that imply a continuity in geographical scope for rulers with a chronological span of nearly two millennia. His table for "Historically Important Non-Rulers in Ancient China" demonstrates how seldom, compared with Sima Qian, he gets down to those outside the central court or at lesser courts, and how much his tables reflect the accidents of archaeological sightings. In the Hereditary Houses, I cannot discern the order in which he presents the ruling lines of the pre-unification era, though Sima Qian's layout is clear. His treatment of documents, received and "unearthed," usually assumes a remarkably early date for them, especially when it comes to his *Exalted Scriptures* (my *Documents* classic); though he is vague, he dates some compositions in that corpus to late Shang (e.g., "Pan Geng"), i.e., the first time we have Chinese script, and he ignores the vagaries of the manuscript culture that prevailed throughout the period under consideration. But why is evidence from the *Guanzi* (late Zhanguo?) marshaled to explain the deeds of the mythical emperors Yao and Shun portrayed in the *Documents* (78), not to mention a pictorial stone which some date to late Eastern Han (81)? Without an explicit statement that the relevant *Documents* chapters probably date to late Zhanguo as well, the coupling of texts and artifacts makes no sense to historians, whose first job is to try to date their objects of study, even when the complexities abound. Shaughnessy extends government back to Xia (not just Shang) (110), and here one wonders, too, about word choice: does not "government"—like "state"—imply more than we have evidence for, strictly speaking? Political rule is not government, which implies institutions, "archives," and "bureaucracies," as opposed to appointments, texts (oral and written), and tasks. Equally jarring is Shaughnessy's attribution to Xunzi of the idea that "ritual" equals "morality" (the latter surely a Kantian and neo-Kantian word). A few of the English translations do not make sense, for example, Mi Jia's account of her achievements (222: "I have diminished the lustre of the lower ruler ... [I] have magnificently enjoyed governance"). Anachronistic language is problematic; still more troubling is a disregard of complexities, where warranted. One instance drawn from the *Documents* classic may suffice: according to the earliest accounts, Xi and He are not just two brothers or two clans (78), but sometimes one, four, or six people.

At the end, Shaughnessy, like Sima Qian, would provide an overview of his writing. Sima Qian did this through a lengthy account of his qualifications for the 600-bushel posting as Senior Archivist, which were mainly genealogical, followed by rhymed summaries of the chapter contents. By contrast, Shaughnessy states that he has "tried to introduce the new perspectives one would expect in a twenty-first-century work" (370). Fair enough, but, unlike Sima Qian, Shaughnessy never tells readers which new perspectives intrigue him, let alone how those perspectives encourage us to rethink the remote past. Certainly, he has not rethought Mark Elvin's belief that "Chinese-style sedentary agriculture" was responsible for devastating environmental consequences as far back as Shang. Recent archaeology suggests, however, that those consequences date, in all likelihood, to late imperial China, as the population (a) grew dramatically, and (b) moved south in great numbers. Nor does Shaughnessy dispute the old assertion that the Zhou introduced a new god called Tian, whose "mandate" theory (Tianming) derives from Western Zhou (91); yet on four counts, at least, this picture misleads: (1) Tianming used in this sense is stunningly absent from Sima Qian's writing, who usually renders Tianming as "allotted lifespan" instead, except when he is quoting two of the Five Classics; (2) Tian and Di appear together in many Zhou sources (as is plain

from evidence adduced by Shaughnessy, 95); (3) Tian cannot be simultaneously unspeakably old (“fourth millennium BCE”) and newly introduced by the early Zhou rulers (77); and (4) Tianming has no fixed content, with Mencius’ version at odds with that of Ban Biao and several others. Nor has Shaughnessy challenged the old idea of the singular importance of the patriline to elite families (92), despite good early evidence that the family was configured more capaciously, especially in marriage and mourning rituals, as the Mawangdui mourning diagram attests.⁴ The questionable mid-Zhou “Ritual Revolution” theory, which conflates changes in decorative styles with changes in ritual practices (95), remains firmly in place, as does Keightley’s famous description of the Chinese (and increasingly their self-description) as “irenic,” more interested in moral issues and chivalry than in battle logistics.⁵ A reading of *Guoyu* on the battles between Wu and Yue, not to mention the “Military Victory” (Wu cheng 武成) account known to Mencius but not included in the Han-era *Documents* classic, would disabuse the author of that particular truism. He is stuck in the language of schools (Legalist, Mohist, Confucian, etc.) (117), with ideology driving politics and not the reverse. He speaks of the promulgation of law codes, when loose collections of statutes and precedents “like statutes” (如律, i.e., with the force of laws) is truer to the sources (115). He sticks to the outmoded language of pictograms, which linguists abhor. Shaughnessy is more believable, then, when he modestly suggests, “I have not broken any new ground with this book” (368).

This does not mean that the book can be easily laid aside. I am grateful to its author for introducing me to certain sites and finds that I did not know. And certainly, the book’s provocative choice of structure sends us back to the drawing board to think harder about how Sima Qian made history, and especially how Sima Qian, presumably following his Kongzi in this, dealt with ambiguities or the absence of evidence. It causes us, too, to ponder why the gap between some fields is growing, and whether and how those chasms might be bridged, given a modicum of good will and a frank acknowledgement of the other party’s erudition. Undoubtedly, none of us has the verbal flair to rival Sima Qian at his most compelling. Why, then, hazard the comparison?

⁴For details see Michael Nylan, ed., *China’s Early Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), chap. 10.

⁵Keightley wrote of the Chinese distaste for depicting bloodshed, in a number of places, perhaps most famously in his essay, “Early Civilization in China: Reflections on How It Became Chinese,” in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, edited by Paul S. Ropp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 15–54.