Some Remarks on Early Chinese Historical Works

By **Burton Watson**

LET ME BEGIN by quoting a passage from the *Han shu* or *History of the Former Han* by Pan Ku (A.D. 32-92).

> When Wang Chi was still young and busy with his studies, he lived in Ch'ang-an. The family to the east had a large jujube tree whose branches hung down in Wang Chi's garden. His wife used to pick the jujubes and give them to her husband to eat, but later, when he found out where she was getting them, he ordered her out of the house. The family to the east, hearing what had happened, were about to cut down their tree, but the neighbors got together and persuaded them to stop. They also went and pleaded with Wang Chi until he agreed to let his wife come back again. The people of the neighborhood accordingly made up a saying that went:
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> *House to the east—a tree had they;*
> *Wang Chi's wife's been sent away.*
> *East house jujube—they spared its life,*
> *And home again is the cast-off wife.*
>
> This is an example of what a stern-principled man Wang Chi was.

This is the kind of lively little anecdote that at times makes Chinese historical works such rewarding reading and that inspires one to try to put them into English. It occurs in *Han shu* 72, toward the end of the biography of a first century B.C. Confucian official named Wang Chi, after a lengthy treatment of Wang's career and quotations from the memorials of reprimand he delivered to the sovereign. Suddenly we are no longer in the solemn world of imperial audiences and state papers, but in a rather cramped quarter of Ch'ang-an, where the tree next door hangs down in the courtyard. In rapid succession we view a loving but somewhat

thoughtless wife, an ostentatiously scrupulous husband, a neighbor who overreacts, and other neighbors who in a spirit of goodwill hurry about patching things up, the whole rounded off with an artless ditty that celebrates the happy outcome of the affair. Outside of the *yüeh-fu* poems, the historical works such as the *Shih chi* and *Han shu* are almost our only source for such glimpses into the daily lives of the people of Han times. Episodes of this type, brief as they are, suddenly bring ancient China and its inhabitants to life before our eyes.

The great Chinese historical works, with their vast scope and variety, are many different things to different readers: a stirring record of the great men and moments of the past, a source of invaluable data for specialized studies, a collection of cautionary lessons for the future, a handbook of literary styles. Ideally, a translation from such works should be designed so as to satisfy all types of readers. But the amount of annotation required to meet the specialists' need is very likely to overwhelm the reader who is merely in search of an overall view, and the rigidly literal rendering that some scholars feel is appropriate in the case of classical texts will prove painful to many readers (one thinks of the late Professor Homer Dubs's lumbering and bracket-ridden translations from the *Han shu*).

In my own translations from the *Shih chi* and *Han shu* I attempted to concentrate on the literary appeal of the works, keeping annotation to a minimum and trying to translate a commensurably larger volume of material instead. Since the famous Greek and Roman historians are available to the general English reader in such translations, it seemed reasonable to me to present Ssu-ma Ch'ien and Pan Ku in the same fashion. What I failed to consider was that "popular" translations of Greek and Roman historians are acceptable in English because scholarly and heavily annotated translations of such works already exist and can be consulted by those in search of more detailed information, whereas that of course is not the case with most Chinese historical works. I continue to feel that my translations, though far from ideal, serve a purpose by conveying something of the literary impact of the originals, though I have been sufficiently scolded for my paucity of annotation to know that many readers take a much sterner view.

Just getting across the literary qualities of the Chinese histories can be difficult enough in translation. First, there is the problem of names, of which historical writing is so often in effect a lengthy rehearsal—reduced to romanized form, Chinese names can be maddenly similar, and even the most attentive reader of the translation will find himself losing track of who is who. In assigning readings in my *Shih chi* and *Han shu* translations to American undergraduates who are not specializing in Asian studies, I have been consistently disappointed to find that they seem to be so discombobulated by the names that they cannot even follow the thread of the story. The struggle between Hsiang Yü and Liu Pang ought to be as dramatic and exciting as anything in Herodotus or Thucydides, and yet it does not appear to come across to English readers in that way, at least when read in my translation, partly because of the difficulty of the names.

In addition to this problem of names, the Chinese historian's practice of quoting basic sources in extenso rather than summarizing their content makes for frequent changes of pace and style in the text. At one moment the reader is ambling through the ornate diction and balanced periods of a long-winded memorial or essay,

the next he is racing along in swift and economical narrative. And because of this customary economy of expression in the passages of action, the dramatic moments of the narrative are likely to go by very rapidly. The translator longs for some way to slow the reader down, some device such as a marginal gloss by which he can say to him, "Pay attention! This is terrific stuff!"

Take, for example, the following passage from *Han shu* 76 describing the final moments of Han Yen-shou, an official of the time of Emperor Hsüan who was much admired by the people but who became entangled in a quarrel with the imperial secretary Hsiao Wang-chih and was eventually condemned to execution.

> Several thousand of the officials and people escorted him as far as Wei-ch'eng, old and young leaning on and clinging to the hubs of his carriage and scrambling to offer him wine and roast meat. Yen-shou could not bear to push them away, and one after another they poured drinks for him. When he calculated he had drunk a liter or so of wine, he ordered the clerks to divide the rest among the people who had come to see him off, thanking them for their trouble and for the long way they had come. Thus Yen-shou died without regrets, and there were none among the common people who did not weep.

The whole passage hardly exceeds three or four lines in the original, and yet, among all the somber and grisly death scenes recorded in the *Han shu*, it stands out like a little island of brightness. Here is a man who, though a victim of bureaucratic infighting, is going to his death like a hero, wined and feasted, surrounded by admiring throngs, and—could he have been even faintly aware of it?—destined to have his story recorded for posterity in one of the greatest of China's historical works.

Such passages, though often brief in themselves, gain their dramatic impact from the fact that they come after numerous slow-paced pages of build-up in the action. They resemble the climactic moment of a Nō play, in which a brief flurry of action can be shatteringly effective because of the long periods of relative inaction that have preceded it. Thus, the following highly dramatic scene of confrontation between one of Wang Mang's supporters and Empress Dowager Wang, the long-lived consort of Emperor Yüan and mother of Emperor Ch'eng, bursts upon the reader after he has worked his way through a lengthy and rather colorless account of the gradual rise to power of the Wang clan, and of Wang Mang in particular, a rise that, ironically enough, was greatly facilitated by the Empress Dowager herself.

Wang Mang, as the final step in his usurpation of the throne, has determined to gain possession of the seal of state, which was in the custody of his aunt, the Empress Dowager, since the nominal ruler was a mere infant at this time. The seal, which had belonged originally to the Ch'in dynasty, had been surrendered to the founder of the Han by the last Ch'in ruler and passed down to successive Han emperors. In the passage that follows, the Empress Dowager, who was in her seventies at the time, uses the word "brothers" loosely to mean male members of the Wang clan who were of the same generation as Wang Mang and were supporting him in his rise to power.

Wang Mang sent Wang Shun, the Marquis of An-yang, to try to persuade the Empress Dowager to give him the seal. Wang Shun was upright and circumspect by nature and the Empress Dowager had always loved and trusted him. When Wang Shun appeared, the Empress Dowager knew that he had come on Wang Mang's behalf to ask for the seal. She rebuked him angrily, saying, "You and your father and the rest of your family have enjoyed the protection of the house of Han and for generations have been rich and eminent. And now, without attempting to repay that debt, you are asked to look out for the infant ruler and you try instead to take advantage of the time and circumstances to snatch the country away from him! You give not the slightest thought to principle or to the debt you owe! Even dogs and pigs would refuse to eat the leftovers from the likes of you! Where in this wide world is there a place for you and your brothers!

"You and your lot have used your 'Metal Casket' and your 'Portents Concerning the Mandate'[1] to set up the emperor of the Hsin dynasty and change the beginning of the year and the color of the vestments. It is only right that you should make a new imperial seal as well, to be handed down to the ten thousand generations to come. What use do you have with this seal, an unlucky thing inherited from the lost kingdom of Ch'in, that you should come asking for it? I am an old widow of the house of Han, one who expects death at any moment now. I want to be buried along with this seal. You will never have it!"

The Empress Dowager wept as she spoke, and those by her side, from her senior attendant on down, all shed tears. Wang Shun too could not help but grieve, but after some time he raised his head and said to the Empress Dowager, "I and the others have nothing more that we can say to him—Wang Mang is determined he will have the state seal. How can you avoid handing it over to him in the end?"

When the Empress Dowager heard Wang Shun speaking in such a pressing manner, she began to fear that Wang Mang would do some injury to him, and so finally she brought out the state seal that had been handed down by the Han rulers. She flung it on the ground for Wang Shun to pick up, saying, "I'm old and as good as dead. But I know that you and your brothers will be wiped out now—the entire family!" (*Han shu* 98)

IN ADDITION TO their literary interest, I believe there is another reason why the major Chinese historical texts ought to be translated into English. As is well known, historical works, particularly the early ones such as the *Shih chi* and *Han shu*, played a major role in the education of the Chinese in traditional times. For the Western student of Chinese culture, therefore, it is as important to know something about the content of such works as it is for the student of traditional Western culture to

[1]Documents that Wang Mang circulated in order to "prove" that Heaven had withdrawn its approval from the Han and appointed him to set up a new dynasty, the Hsin, to rule in its place.

SSU-MA CH'IEN. *This figure drawing and those on pp. 44, 52 and 53 are reproduced from* Illustrated Biographies from Wan Hsiao T'ang 晚笑堂畫傳, *by the early Ch'ing painter Shang-kuan Chou* 上官周, *Shao Hua Cultural Service Press, Hong Kong.*

familiarize himself with Classical mythology and the Bible.

Moreover, when one reads extensively in Chinese historical writings, one soon notices that certain motifs or patterns of behavior tend to recur again and again. It seems to me there are two possible explanations for such recurring patterns. They may have been imposed upon the data of history by the historian himself, or by the writers or storytellers who shaped the material upon which the historian has drawn. Thus certain types of personalities in history would appear almost automatically to attract to themselves certain types of anecdotes, anecdotes that in the past had been applied to earlier examples of the same personality type. Another possibility is that the men and women of traditional China, thoroughly familiar as they were with the story of their nation's past, chose deliberately to act out the roles of their historical heroes, consciously repeating the same types of actions and utterances.

Whatever their origins, it is important that the student of Chinese history and culture should recognize such actions as stereotypes or conventional patterns of behavior rather than mistaking them for unique behavior on the part of the person to whom they happen to be attributed. The great danger facing the Western student of Chinese culture is that, jumping into the midst of such a lengthy tradition without an adequate knowledge of its beginnings, he will fail to understand what elements within a given work of literature or art or philosophy are conventional and what are original. And without such an understanding he cannot begin to ask where the conventions derive from or what their significance is in the particular work under consideration.

The *Shih chi* and *Han shu* have played an important role in the formation of such conventional or behavioral motifs. But even more influential in this respect is the great historical work that precedes them, the *Tso chuan*, which, because of its status as a Classic, constituted an indispensable part of a traditional-style education.

Let us consider for a moment the nature of these motifs or patterns of behavior as they appear in the *Tso chuan*. I will begin by quoting the first episode in the *Tso chuan*, which also happens to be one of the most famous. I recall reading it for the first time many years ago when I was a student in Professor Chi-chen Wang's third year Chinese class at Columbia. At that time it struck me as so excruciatingly difficult that I very nearly abandoned Chinese studies on the spot.

> Duke Yin first year (722 B.C.)
>
> In the past, Duke Wu of Cheng had taken a bride from the state of Shen, known as Lady Chiang of Duke Wu. Lady Chiang gave birth to the future Duke Chuang and to Kung Shu Tuan. Duke Chuang was born wide awake and consequently greatly startled Lady Chiang.[2] Therefore she named him Born Awake and came to hate him. But she loved Kung Shu Tuan and wished to have him declared heir to the dukedom. Repeatedly she begged Duke Wu to arrange it, but he would not agree.
>
> Later, when Duke Chuang became ruler of the state (743 B.C.), Lady Chiang asked him to assign the city of Chih to his younger brother Tuan. But the duke replied, "Chih is a strategic city, the place where Kuo She met his death.[3] Any other city you have only to ask for."
>
> She then requested that Tuan be given the city of Ching, and he was accordingly sent to reside there. He came to be called the Grand Younger Brother of Ching City.
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> Chi Chung, a high official of Cheng, said to the duke, "If any of the major cities have walls that exceed a hundred *chih*, they pose a danger to the capital.[4] According to the regulations laid down by the former kings, even the largest cities should not exceed one third of the size of the capital, while middle sized cities should be one fifth and small cities one ninth. Now the city of Ching does not fit these dimensions and violates the regulations. You may find yourself unable to control it!"
>
> The duke said, "Lady Chiang would have it that way—how can I avoid danger?"
>
> "There is no end to what Lady Chiang would have!" replied Chi

[2]The term *wu-sheng*, translated here as "born wide awake," has also been interpreted to mean "born just as his mother was waking up" or "born feet first." Ssu-ma Ch'ien, in his account of the state of Cheng, *Shih chi* 42, adds that the birth was a difficult one, apparently in order to help explain the mother's loathing for her firstborn.

[3]A ruler of the nearby state of Kuo who made his capital at Chih and behaved evilly until overthrown by Cheng.

[4]One *chih* is said to represent a section of city wall one *chang* in height and three *chang* (or, according to another theory, five *chang*) in length. One *chang* is said to have equalled ten feet.

Chung. "Better tend to the matter at once and not let it grow and put out tentacles, for tentacles can be hard to handle. If even vines that have put forth tentacles cannot be rooted out, how much more so the favored younger brother of the ruler!"

The duke said, "If he does too many things that are not right, he is bound to defeat himself. I suggest you wait a while."

After some time, the Grand Younger Brother ordered that the western and northern border regions of the state acknowledge fealty to him as well as to the duke. Kung-tzu Lü, an official of Cheng, said to the duke, "The state cannot tolerate such a system of double fealty. If you intend to sanction what the Grand Younger Brother has done, then with your permission I will serve him rather than you. If you do not intend to sanction it, then I beg you to do away with him before he stirs up the hearts of the people!"

"No need," said the duke. "He will accomplish his own downfall."

The Grand Younger Brother then proceeded to take over the cities that had previously acknowledged double fealty and make them his own, extending his control as far as Lin-yen. Kung-tzu Lü said, "Now is the time to act! If he increases his territory, he will acquire more men."

The duke replied, "He is acting wrongfully and in an unbrotherly manner. If he increases his territory, he will face ruin."

The Grand Younger Brother completed building his walls, called together his men, mended his armor and weapons, equipped his foot soldiers and chariots, and prepared for a surprise attack on the capital of Cheng. Lady Chiang was to open the city to him. When the duke learned the date planned for the attack, he said, "Now is the time!" He ordered Kung-tzu Lü to lead a force of two hundred chariots and attack Ching. The people of Ching turned against the Grand Younger Brother Tuan, who took refuge in the city of Yen. The duke attacked him at Yen, and on the day *hsin-ch'ou* of the fifth month, the Grand Younger Brother fled the state and went to Kung. . . .

In the end the duke confined his mother, Lady Chiang, in Ch'eng-ying and took a vow, saying, "Not until we reach the Yellow Springs shall we meet again!"[5]

Later, he regretted his vow. Ying K'ao-shu, a border guard of Ying Valley, hearing of this, presented gifts to the duke, and the duke in turn had a meal served to him. He ate the meat but set aside the meat broth. When the duke asked him why, he replied, "Your servant has a mother who shares whatever he eats, but she has never tasted your lordship's broth. I beg permission to take her some."

"You have a mother to take things to. Alas, I alone have none!" said the duke.

[5] Yellow Springs, meaning springs within the yellow earth, is a term for the land of the dead.

"May I venture to ask what you mean by that?" said Ying K'ao-shu.

The duke explained why he had made the remark, and confessed that he regretted his vow.

"Why should your lordship worry?" said the other. "If you dig into the earth until you reach the springs, and fashion a tunnel where the two of you can meet, then who is to say you have not kept your vow?"

The duke did as he suggested. As the duke entered the tunnel, he intoned this verse:

Inside the great tunnel,
genial, genial is my joy!

As Lady Chiang emerged from the tunnel, she intoned this verse:

Outside the great tunnel,
spacious, spacious is my joy!

So in the end mother and son became as they had been before.

The gentleman remarks:[6] Ying K'ao-shu was a man of true filial devotion. He loved his mother, and succeeded in inspiring a similar feeling in Duke Chuang. Is this not what the *Book of Odes* means when it says:

Filial sons you shall not lack;
forever shall be given to you good things.[7]

(For Chinese text see pages 197-198)

The episode begins with a motif common in folklore, the infant who startles or disgusts its mother because of some unusual appearance or manner of birth. Unfortunately, because of doubt as to the meaning of the term *wu-sheng*, we are uncertain just what it was about the birth that made Lady Chiang hate the child. The extreme terseness of the *Tso chuan*'s narrative and its refusal to elaborate on the action, or even at times to supply the reader with the minimum of information needed to follow the account, mean that the text can very easily lapse into obscurity with the passage of time.

The section that follows might be summed up under the rubric "Give him enough rope and he will hang himself." It is highly stylized in presentation: each time the younger brother makes some move to expand his power, someone warns the duke and urges him to take action, and each time the duke summarily rejects the advice. We are led to believe that he is hopelessly stupid or unperceptive, only to discover in the end that he was simply waiting until the right moment to act.

[6]The *Tso chuan* frequently introduces didactic comments on its narrative in this fashion. The "gentleman" was traditionally believed to have been Confucius.

[7]*Ta-ya, Chi-tsui*, Mao text no. 247.

After the flight of the younger brother, there is a brief passage in which the *Tso* comments on the wording of the entry concerning the action in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. But since we are not concerned here with the *Annals* or its relationship to the *Tso*, I have omitted the passage in translation.

The remainder of the episode treats another theme common in folklore, how to get around a vow that one has made unwisely or in anger without actually breaking it. There is a certain primitively pious air about the episode, premised as it is on the conviction that vows, even one's own, must never under any circumstances be broken. Elsewhere in the *Tso*, and often side by side with such old-fashioned piety, there are evidences of a much more cynical attitude toward the sanctity of vows and oaths and the likelihood of divine retribution falling on those who break them.[8]

With the appearance of the border guard Ying, we are introduced to a theme that might be labelled the Filial Diner: someone who is offered food sets part of it aside for an absent parent. The motif appears elsewhere in the *Tso* itself, for example, in Duke Hsüan 2nd year, where an official of Chin named Ling Ch'e is given food and puts aside part of it for his mother, and often in later historiography, e.g., the biography of Lu Chi of Wu (*San-kuo-chih* ch. 57) who, when only a small boy, is served oranges by a host and surreptitiously stuffs three of them in the breast of his robe to take home to his mother, only to have them roll out incriminatingly when he makes his parting bows. There is of course no reason to doubt that many loving and thoughtful Chinese did in fact on occasion set aside part of a meal to take to an absent parent. But already by very early times the action has become established as a kind of literary motif or behavioral pattern that, when it appears in historiographical writing, is intended to flash "FILIAL PIETY" in large letters to the reader.

The Tunnel Scene that concludes the episode is an example of the *Tso* narrative at its most bizarre. It could scarcely be more compressed or stylized in presentation. We are told nothing about the building of the tunnel, but merely shown the duke entering it, and his mother emerging, each intoning an odd little rhymed couplet that was apparently composed on the spot.

The personages in the *Tso chuan* often recite verses from the *Book of Odes*, usually in order to convey some political message, but they seem to have had little time or inclination for poetic composition of their own. The two couplets here, plus a few other very brief utterances, are all the specimens of original poetry that can be gleaned from the pages of the *Tso*, a marked contrast with the *Shih chi* or *Han shu*, which contain large numbers of songs and poems. It is possible, of course, that the original poetic utterances, here and elsewhere in the *Tso*, were much longer and that the *Tso* in its maniacal preoccupation with terseness has seen fit to quote only fragments.

It might be noted here that the *Tso*'s famous passion for economy of ex-

[8]For example, Duke Ch'eng 15, where Ch'u is preparing to invade Chin's sphere of influence. One Ch'u courtier objects that such action is improper, since Ch'u has only recently concluded a peace alliance with Chin, but another, named Tzu-fan, retorts, "In the case of a rival, if it's to your advantage, move against him! Why worry about an alliance?" The *Tso*, apparently to show its disapproval of this attitude, then quotes the words of an elder statesman who predicts that Tzu-fan will come to a bad end as a result of such lack of good faith.

PAN KU, *compiler of* Han Shu *or* History of the Former Han.

pression does not always extend to the speech portions of the text. The second speech of Chi Chung in the episode quoted above, with its talk of vines and tentacles, is considerably longer than need be to convey the meaning, and in many of the more formal speeches in the *Tso*, which employ elaborate rhetorical devices, the effect can be downright prolix.[9] Stylistically, the *Tso* at times seems less like a historical narrative than a drama text in which the speeches have been written out in full but the action merely noted down in a kind of shorthand.

After the conclusion of the episode proper, the *Tso* adds a passage of didactic comment on the narrative. Such passages, which are akin to the *tsan* or appraisal sections employed in later historical works, may well have been added to the text at a considerably later date. This one ends, in the manner of the early philosophers, by rounding off its lesson with a quotation from the Confucian Classics.

IN 203 B.C., when Hsiang Yü and Liu Pang, the founder of the Han dynasty, had reached a stalemate in their struggle for mastery of the empire, they faced each other over a ravine. Hsiang Yü challenged his opponent to single combat, but Liu Pang, according to the account in *Shih chi* 8, declined the challenge and instead delivered a long harangue in which he enumerated ten "crimes" that he declared Hsiang Yü was guilty of.

It is possible that this rather unheroic behavior was a course of action that

[9]See, for example, Duke Yin 3, the admonition of Shih Ch'üeh to Duke Chuang of Wei, with its tedious parallelisms and word chains.

simply occurred to Liu Pang on the spot. Or it may have been recommended to him by one of his advisers, or have been a customary procedure in such circumstances. But one ought to be aware that there is a precedent for such action in earlier history, recorded in the *Tso chuan*, Duke Chao 2nd year (540 B.C.), when the distinguished statesman Tzu-ch'an of the state of Cheng sent his envoy to a would-be rebel, Kung-sun Hei, to "enumerate" *(shu)* the crimes that the latter was guilty of, in this case three rather than ten.[10] If the men of Liu Pang's time, or the readers of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's account of the scene, believed that Liu Pang was patterning his behavior after that of Tzu-ch'an, who was much admired by Confucius, it would most certainly affect the way they judged his worth and stature as a leader.

Some such similarities between the behavior of persons in early historiography and those in later texts may be purely fortuitous. But we may be certain that many others are meant to be deliberate, either on the part of the person who carried out such behavior, or on the part of the writer who attributed it to him. What we clearly need at this point is an index or catalogue of the themes or behavior patterns in the *Tso chuan* and other early historical texts so that we can readily identify such stereotypes in later historical writing and understand what their precedents are. Only when we become aware of such precedents can we fully appreciate what significance or moral overtones the action would have for Chinese readers.

Before leaving the subject of the *Tso chuan*, I would like to speculate for a moment as to why its narrative is so stylized, as we have seen in the brief episode quoted above, particularly in comparison to works such as the *Shih chi* and *Han shu* that follow it. Why, for example, are its great battle scenes so stereotyped in treatment that we can almost tick off the standard elements as they go by: 1. debates for and against military action; 2. the prophetic dream or utterance (always prophesizing correctly); 3. the divination; 4. the lineup (who rode in what chariot, who drove, who stood on the right); 5. the engagement; 6. the booty (number of heads and prisoners taken); 7. the return; 8. the disposition of spoils and prisoners. This same type of stylization and fondness for symmetry in description, it should be noted, is also typical of the *Kuo yü*, the historical text that is closest in time and style to the *Tso*.

One can of course say that that is how the author or authors of the *Tso* wrote it, and leave the matter at that. But it seems to me that such stylization and conventionalization can be much more easily explained by supposing that the accounts were shaped in an oral tradition, perhaps over a considerable period of time, before they were put down in written form.

How else, for example, are we to account for the fact that, though both the *Tso chuan* (Chuang 4 to Hsi 32) and the *Kuo yü* (*Chin yü* 1 to 4) contain extensive accounts of the wandering hero Ch'ung-erh, who later became Duke Wen of Chin, the two accounts, though similar in outline, often differ in wording and detail? Were there several different written accounts of the period for the historians to draw on? Or, as seems more likely, did they draw from oral recitations concerning Ch'ung-erh, his benighted father, and his ill-fated half brothers, which differed

[10] A similar enumeration of three crimes appears in Duke Hsiang 14, in the speech of Ting Chiang, the mother of Duke Hsien of Wei, though without the use of the verb *shu*.

slightly depending on the reciter or the region where they were handed down?

Or how do we account for the following: the *Tso chuan*, Duke Hsüan 17th year (592 B.C.) says that Chin sent an envoy to the state of Ch'i. The mother of Duke Ch'ing of Ch'i, looking down from her chamber, saw the envoy ascending the steps and burst out laughing. The envoy was so incensed by her action that he swore to have vengeance on the state of Ch'i. The *Tso chuan*, sparing of words as usual, offers no explanation of why the lady laughed, though Tu Yü (A.D. 222-284) in his commentary says it was because the envoy was lame.

The *Kung Yang Commentary*, which relates the same incident under Duke Ch'eng 1st year, says that there were two envoys from Chin that the duke's mother looked down on, one lame and the other one-eyed (or perhaps the meaning is squint-eyed). The *Ku Liang Commentary*, which also relates the incident under Duke Ch'eng 1st year, says that the Chin envoy was one-eyed and came in company with an envoy from Wei who was lame and one from Ts'ao who was hunchbacked. Finally, Ssu-ma Ch'ien, in his telling of the incident in *Shih chi* 39, says that the Chin envoy was hunchbacked, the Lu *(sic)* envoy was lame, and the Wei envoy was one-eyed. In other words, we have four versions of the episode, each one of them different. It is possible that discrepancies in detail in the four accounts come from careless copying or the fact that there were diverse written accounts of the incident. But it would appear much more likely that they are due to the fact that the writers are drawing on an oral tradition.

At this point I cannot offer any incontrovertible evidence that such an oral tradition existed, nor can I explain why, if it did, there is not clear mention in early texts of the reciters and their story cycles. And yet I feel certain that, among all the various teachers and historians, blind reciters and admonishers that the *Kuo yü* says attended the Chou ruler (*Chou yü* 1), there must have been some who recited historical tales for his edification.

I HAVE SPOKEN of the importance of translating the early historical works because of their literary qualities and because of the key role they have played in recording and popularizing certain behavioral patterns or motifs. There is another reason why I think they ought to be translated: because, like the mountain that demands to be climbed, they are there, and because the Chinese have over the centuries attached such immense importance to their transmission and study. The *Tso* in a famous passage (Duke Ch'eng 14) praises the *Spring and Autumn Annals* for its ability to "censure evil and encourage good," and this same didactic function has customarily been attributed to later works of history as well. The ancient Greek historian Polybius, expressing the Western view of history, states: "The mere statement of a fact may interest us but is of no benefit to us: but when we add the cause of it, study of history becomes fruitful." (Bk. XII, Loeb Classics translation, vol. IV, p. 371.) I will conclude these rather rambling remarks with a statement of the traditional Chinese view of the importance of history and the fruits to be gained from its study, taken from the opening of chapter 11 of the first major work on Chinese historiography, the *Shih t'ung* by Liu Chih-chi (661-721).

Man lives in his bodily shape between heaven and earth and his life is like the span of the summer fly, like the passing of a white colt glimpsed through a crack in the wall. Yet he is shamed to think that within those years his merit will not be known, and grieved that after his departure his name will not be heard. Thus from emperors and kings down to the poorest commoner, from the gentlemen of the court to the hermits in their far-off hills and forests, there is truly none who is not tireless in pursuing merit and fame and impassioned in his thoughts of them. Why is this? Because all have their heart set on immortality. And what, then, is immortality? No more than to have one's name written in a book.

If the world had no books, if the ages were without their historiographers, then whether men were sage rulers like Yao and Shun or tyrants like Chieh and Chou, loyal ministers like I Yin or the Duke of Chou or traitors like Wang Mang and Tung Cho, worthy men like Po I or Liu-hsia Hui or robbers like Chih and Ch'iao, parricides like Shang and Mao or models of filial devotion like Tseng Tzu and Min Tzu-ch'ien, once death had changed their form, the earth on their graves would hardly have dried before the good and the evil would have become indistinguishable from one another, and both beauty and ugliness would have perished forever. But so long as the office of historiographer is carried on, so long as books continue to exist, then though men die and enter into darkness and empty silence, their deeds remain, shining like the stars of the Milky Way. Then when a man hereafter shall study them, he has only to lift the scrolls from their boxes and his spirit may commune with the vast ages of antiquity; he need not go beyond his courtyard door and his vision can encompass a thousand years. He sees the worthy men and thinks to equal them; he sees the unworthy and his thoughts turn to introspection. Thus it is said that when Confucius completed the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, unruly sons were filled with fear; when the historian from the south arrived at court, the act of the evil minister was plainly set down.[11] Such was the way they recorded actions and words, and such the way they encouraged good and censured evil. How manifold, then, are the benefits we reap from the uses of history! The study of history is a pressing duty for living men and a fundamental concern of the state. He who rules a state or heads a family—can he afford to neglect history?

[11]The remark concerning the *Spring and Autumn Annals* derives from *Mencius* IIIB9. The second part of the sentence refers to the famous incident recorded in *Tso chuan*, Duke Hsiang 25. When Ts'ui Shu, minister of the state of Ch'i, assassinated Duke Chuang of Ch'i and set up his own brother as duke, the Grand Historian of Ch'i wrote: "Ts'ui Shu assassinated his lord," whereupon Ts'ui murdered him. The historian's younger brother succeeded him, wrote the same thing, and was also murdered, as was a second younger brother. When a third brother wrote the same thing, Ts'ui finally desisted. Meanwhile, another historian living in the southern part of the state, hearing that the historians had been killed, grasped his writing tablets and hastened to court, retiring only after he learned that the deed of assassination had been truthfully recorded.

THE GRAND HISTORIAN, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien (145-86 B.C.) endured cruel punishment and completed* Shih chi *(Records of the Historian), the work that set a model for Chinese history writing for later generations. This portrait is from a Ming woodcut album* 歷代古人像贊 *(Portraits and Eulogies of Historical Figures), dated 1475. Done by an anonymous artist, these prints have been regarded as among the earliest and the finest of their kind. See page 39 for a later artist's interpretation of Ssu-ma Ch'ien.*