

劉知幾：史通敘事章

Understanding History: the Narration of Events

By Liu Chih-chi

Translated by Stuart H. Sargent

What follows is the first part of a chapter entitled "The Narration of Events" (hsü-shih), the 22nd of the Inner Chapters of the Shih-t'ung, which is the first important Chinese work of historiographic criticism. Although the author, Liu Chih-chi, is concerned here primarily with style, the chapter does tell us something about his conception of historical writing as an object of philosophical or moral contemplation.

Liu deplors the difference in quality between the classic histories—the Shang shu 尚書 (Book of Documents) and the Ch'un-ch'iu 春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals)—and the histories written in the Han dynasty, not to mention later efforts. As he points out, however, the subject matter within one history or one period of history writing will make a difference in the impression one has of the writing itself, a difference often unfair to the writer. After warning his readers of this pitfall, he returns to the one great standard of historical writing, the measure by which the Classics outshine all else: succinctness. It is on this basis that the works of the ancient historians, whether they chose to describe a few events fully or many events with almost no detail at all, were truly classics.

If a historian followed Liu's prescription, every line he wrote would demand the kind of contemplation and interpretation we usually associate with the reading of poetry before it would release its implications. Thus, history would be as timeless as the significance of the original events themselves.

—TRANSLATOR

IN HISTORICAL WRITINGS that are praised for their excellence, the foremost element is their narration of events. They write of merits and transgressions and record good and evil in a way that is elegant but not flowery, substantive but not crude. And so one tastes their fine flavor and cherishes their virtuous message—three times through and one forgets his fatigue, a hundred times over and there is no satiation. If the writer of such a history is not to be called a sage, to whom else could the title be allowed?

The narrative writings of the ancient sages, from the *Yao Tien* 堯典 [a section of the *Book of Documents*] to the capture of the unicorn [in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*]¹ are in the language of “assembled speeches and juxtaposed events,”² or convey messages of “perceptive understanding and far-reaching knowledge.”³ Tzu-hsia 子夏 [a disciple of Confucius] said, “In its discussion of events, the *Documents* is bright as the moon and sun shining in succession.” Yang Hsiung 揚雄 [53 B.C. – 18 A.D.] said, “In explaining events, nothing is clearer than the *Documents*; in explaining principles, nothing is clearer than the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.”⁴ [In the *Documents*] the import is deep and mysterious, and the pronouncements and teachings convey a meaning. [In the *Spring and Autumn*] the obscure is made apparent, the mysterious explicated; circumspectly it forms a pattern. Although these two books travel on diverse roads and in different tracks, each has its own place. Indeed, they are the paragon for a million years, the models for all time; they form the crowning glory of narration, and are truly the tortoise and mirror for posterity.⁵

After this there are the *Shih chi* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*), by Ssu-ma Ch'ien 司馬遷 [145 – 86 B.C.], and the *Han shu* 漢書 (*Han Documents* or *History of the Former Han*) of Pan Ku 班固 [32 – 92], created as continuations of the sages, but inferior to them. Thus the scholars of the world all speak first of the Five Classics and then of the Three Histories.⁶ The categories of Classic and History were therefore distinguished from each other. I once tried to put it into words by saying, “The Classics are like the sun, the histories like the stars. Now, when the bright sun’s light flows forth, then the arrayed stars rest their brilliance; but when the sun sets between the mulberry and elm and evening comes, the constellations appear clear and bright.” Thus, if the writing in the *Records of the Historian* and *Han Documents* were matched against the age of the *Book of Documents* and the *Spring and Autumn*, their words would seem shallow and vulgar, smacking of the back lanes and like drooping wings that would not rise, or an out-of-tune fife unheard. Only when we come to the period after the Warring States, distantly removed from the sages, can they reveal their “spearpoints” at ease and unconstrained. And so we know that men’s talents are different and as far apart as this. If we compare their relative merits, how could they be spoken of in the same year?

Since the Han, for nearly a thousand years, writers have succeeded one another, in more than one school. When we seek the good ones, surely they are few. Pan Ku

¹14th year of Duke Ai.

²This phrase is used in the *Li chi* 禮記 (*Book of Rites*) K'ai-ming ed., ch. 26, sec. 1, to characterize the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

³*Ibid.* Used to characterize the *Documents*.

⁴*Fa-yen* 法言, Ts'ung-shu chi-ch'eng ed., 5.19.

⁵The tortoise shell, used in ancient times for divination, symbolizes prescience; the mirror represents self-examination.

⁶The third History is the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (*Later Han Documents*) by Fan Yeh 范曄.

and Ssu-ma Ch'ien took up their tablets [as historians],⁷ though they violated the standards of the Five Classics. When the Chin and Sung historians cured the green [bamboo strips to write on], they in turn were unequal to the Three Histories. It is like the distinction between the true King and the mere hegemon, the gap between the pure Way of the former and the mixed policies of the latter.⁸ "Talents are difficult to find"—is this not very much the case?⁹

On the other hand, the written narratives of a man, though they be from the same hand, will have among them unequal quality and different degrees of refinement, as in the *Records of the Historian: the Vitagraphs*¹⁰ of Su Ch'in 蘇秦, Chang Yi 張儀 and Ts'ai Tse 蔡澤 are the most beautiful ones; when it comes to the Annals of the Three and Five,¹¹ and the Vitagraphs of Jih-che 日者, T'ai Ts'ang-kung 太蒼公 [i.e., Pien-ch'üeh Ts'ang-kung 扁鵲蒼公], and Kuei Ts'e 龜策, there is nothing to take as a model. Again, in the *Han Documents*, the Imperial Annals and the Vitagraphs of Ch'en Sheng 陳勝 and Hsiang Yü 項羽 are the best; but when it comes to the Vitagraphs of the Prince of Huai-nan 淮南王, Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju 司馬相如, and Tung-fang Shuo 東方朔, in what way are they even worthy of mention?

And how can a painting be made beautiful by the [mere use of] red on white silk, or an imperial capital find support [only] in its natural setting of mountains and rivers? [Since the subject itself is crucial,] a history about someone ugly in his speech will seem crude, but a chronicle about someone fine in deed will be well-formed. When the times provide no unusual reports, the age lacks remarkable events, and heroes are not active, superior men are not born, and all is petty and ordinary, it must be difficult indeed to go by principles and demand that historians display a good and straightforward style or put forth their subtler talents! Thus Yang Hsiung said, "The records of Yü 虞 and Hsia 夏 are pure and simple; the records of Shang 商 are vast; the records of Chou 周 are stern; after the Chou, the records are sickly!"¹²

⁷"Taking up the tablets" comes from the *Tso Commentary*, 25th year of Duke Hsiang, where it appears in a story which epitomizes the historian's independence from political pressure: In James Legge's translation, "The grand historian wrote [in his tablets]—'Ts'uy Ch'oo murdered his ruler;—for which Ts'uy-tze put him to death. Two of his brothers did the same after him, and were also put to death. A third wrote the same, and was let alone. The historiographer in the south, hearing that the grand historian and his brothers had died in this way, took his tablets and set out [for the court]; but hearing on his way that the record was made, he returned." (*Chinese Classics*, V. 514-15.)

⁸Liu's words "pure" and "mixed" appear to come from Hsün Tzu's 荀子 distinction between the ways of the King and the hegemon (in his "Ch'iang-kuo" 彊國 and "Wang-pa" 王霸 chapters) and I have expanded the translation accordingly.

⁹A phrase adopted from the *Analecets*, Book VIII, Chapter XX, 3.

¹⁰Use of the term "vitagraph," though not without precedent, may require some explanation. It translates *chuan* 傳, which is often rendered into English as "biography." *Chuan*, "tradition," or "knowledge handed down (about a person, a people, or a subject such as economics)" really has no readily understood equivalent in English. "Vitagraph" is chosen to suggest a record of the historically significant aspects of a subject without implying that every *chuan* is a full-fledged biography, tracing the development of a personality.

¹¹"Three" would have to refer to the Three Kings (Yü, T'ang, and Wen or Wu) or Ssu-ma Ch'ien's three Annals on their dynasties, Hsia, Yin (Shang), and Chou. "Five" is of course his "Annals of the Five Thearchs": Huang-ti 黃帝, Chuan Hsü 顓頊, Ti K'u 帝嚳, T'ang Yao 唐堯, Yü Shun 虞舜; *Shih chi*, chüan 1.

¹²*Fa-yen*, 4.13-14, where the text reads, "What is there after the Chou?"

Let us look at Tso Ch'iu-ming's 左丘明 recording of events: when Duke Hsüan 宣 of Ch'i and Duke Wen 文 of Chin were hegemonic leaders and the states of Chin and Ch'u presided by turns over the covenants of the states, he was able to dress up his diction and achieve elegance. But by the time the King's house was in great decline and the affairs of state had fallen in disarray, the lovely words of the *Spring and Autumn* [on which the "Commentary" of Tso Ch'iu-ming was supposedly based] were all but obscured. Now to look at Ssu-ma Ch'ien's recording of events: Writing of the times before Chou, when he speaks of that which is improper, his text is overly cursory and unstructured. Coming to the Ch'in, Han, and later ages, the text is orderly, cohesive, and well-organized, and so shows a brilliance that is worthy of appreciation and praise.

As to the *Han chi* 漢紀 (*Han Annals*) by Hsün Yüeh 荀悅 [148-209], his talents were used to the utmost on the Ten Emperors; in the case of the *Wei shu* 魏書 (*Wei Documents*)¹³ by Ch'en Shou 陳壽 [233-297], his beauty was exhausted on the Three Ancestors. Epagoge suggests all works would be similar to this [in depending on the subject matter for their characteristics or quality].

There are few who recognize what is precious, and it is a rare person who understands music.¹⁴ Recently there have appeared P'ei Tzu-yeh 裴子野 [467-528] and his *Sung lüeh* 宋略 (*Outline of Sung*) and Wang Shao 王劭 [late 6th cent.] and his *Ch'i chih* 齊志 (*Journal of Ch'i*). These two both excel in narration and are not embarrassed before the ancients. Yet people who discuss them all echo like thunder their plaudits for P'ei and unite in their abuse for Wang. Now, it was on account of the refined affairs south of the [Yangtse] River that P'ei was able to wield his brush with skill; and it was the odious happenings in the Central Plain that rendered Wang's writing repeatedly disagreeable. P'ei was devoted to ornamenting with vapid phrasing, while Wang's wish was to preserve a truthful record. This is the means by which the fine and the ugly are differentiated. If Tso Ch'iu-ming appeared again, or Ssu-ma Ch'ien were reborn to record words in the court of Ho-liu-hun 賀六渾¹⁵ or set down events in the reign of Shih-ni-kan 士尼干,¹⁶ I fear they would halt their brushes and put up their tablets and have no means by which to convey a message of virtue. And so in regard to the writers of history, how can one match the present with the past, or generalize about their successes and failures?

NOW, THE GENRE of narrative has many branches, which a few words cannot cover in detail. Here I have divided them by categories and grouped them into three sections, as follows.

Among the excellent histories of states, it is their narration of events which makes them well-formed, and skill in the narration of events lies chiefly in suc-

¹³The *Journal of the Three Kingdoms* 三國志. Ch'i dynasty. Ch'en Shou considered the Wei the legitimate successor to the Han, hence the name *Wei shu* used here.

¹⁴Those who recognize quality are few.

¹⁵Kao Huan 高歡, whose actions against the Northern Wei led to the founding of the Northern

¹⁶Kao Yang 高洋, the first emperor of the Northern Ch'i. Liu Chih-chi's commentators say the cognomen should be written Hou 侯-ni-kan, but they may have been confused by seeing it written with the common substitute for *shih* 士, *ssu* 侯, which looks like *hou*.

cinctness. Great is the timely significance of succinctness! If we look successively at the historians from of old, we find that the work began with the *Book of Documents*. In what the pathfinders recorded, they aimed at keeping the events to a few. The *Spring and Autumn* changed the form, placing a premium on cutting down on words. Here we see the distinct stylistic effects of thinness and amplitude [in recording events], the different deeds of earlier and later historians. It is when the text is concise while the events are rich that we have narrative writing at its best.

From the time of the Two Hans until the Three Kingdoms, the texts of state histories have suffered from increasing prolixity. In the Chin and after, they drift aimlessly ever farther; if one looks for extraneous sentences and picks out excess verbage, in a single line there are sure to be several words added without reason and on a foot of paper there will always be several lines expended needlessly. It is said that "gathered mosquitoes make a thunder," and "enough down will break a carriage shaft." If one is not sparing in paragraphs and sentences and his words and expressions are unlimited, so that it takes two carts to carry what he has written, what is there that is worth speaking of in such a work?

IN GENERAL, there are four different forms of narrative: there is that which directly records a man's abilities and character; there is that which writes down only the events of his life; there is that in which everything is revealed through speeches; and there is that in which everything is made self-evident through the historian's eulogies and commentaries.

Regarding, for example, the Ancient Text *Book of Documents'* praise for the Thearch Yao's virtue, lauding him with the phrase "sincere and courteous, sustaining great modesty," or Tso Ch'iu-ming's *Commentary* on the *Spring and Autumn* speaking of the appearance of Tzu-t'ai-shu 子太叔, assessing him as "handsome and accomplished"¹⁷: what they relate is just this, with no further explanation—this is what is called directly recording abilities and character.

Again, take the case of the *Tso Commentary's* record of Shen-sheng 申生, who hanged himself and perished because he was slandered by [his stepmother] Li-chi 驪姬,¹⁸ or Pan Ku's history stating that Chi Hsin 紀信 took the place of his ruler and died when they were being surrounded by Hsiang Chi 項籍¹⁹. Here the historians did not speak of their moral fortitude, yet their loyalty and filial piety are self-apparent—this is what is called only writing down the events of a person's life.

Again, take the case of the *Book of Documents* relating King Wu's indictment of Chou 紂 [the last Shang ruler] in his oath, where he says, "He has burned and roasted the loyal and good. He has ripped up pregnant women,"²⁰ or the *Tso Commentary's* record of Sui K'uai's 隨會 discussion of the state of Ch'u, where he states, "... labored in wooden carts and tattered hempen clothes to bring the hills and forests under cultivation."²¹ Here both ability or character and acts or events

¹⁷ Legge's translation, *Chinese Classics*, V. 565 (Duke Hsiang, 31st yr.).

¹⁸ See Legge, p. 142 (Duke Hsin, 4th yr.).

¹⁹ See Homer Dubs, *History of the Former Han* (Baltimore, 1938), I. 84-85.

²⁰ Legge's translation, *Chinese Classics*, III. 285.

²¹ Legge's translation, *Chinese Classics*, V. 318 (Duke Hsüan, 12th yr.). These are actually the words of Luan Wu-tzu 樂武子. Sui K'uai was also called Wu-tzu, which probably explains Liu's erroneous attribution of the speech to him.

are absent [from the narrative itself], yet the words entail all these and the matters are exposed clearly—this is what is called revealing through speeches.

Again, at the end of the Vitagraph on Wei Ch'ing 衛青 [? – 106 B.C.], the Grand Historian says that Su Chien 蘇建 once reprimanded the general-in-chief [Wei Ch'ing] for not recommending worthies or using men properly;²² and in the *Han Documents* the eulogy at the end of the Annals of Hsiao-wen says, "When the King of Wu [Liu P'i] feigned illness and did not come to court, [the Emperor] granted him a stool and cane."²³ These are matters not recorded in the Vitagraph or the Annal, but brought out separately by the historians, and this is what is called making the significance self-evident by means of eulogy and commentary.

And yet, these four types of narrative—abilities and character, acts and events, speeches, and eulogy and commentary—are not mutually dependant. In fact, if they are used together and all written out, the waste is especially great. However, from of old, throughout the Classics and Histories, there has been much of this ilk. There are probably not even one or two instances out of ten in which it is avoided successfully.

THERE ARE TWO corollaries to economy in the narration of events: one is cutting down on sentences, the second is cutting down on words. For example, in the *Tso Commentary*, "Hua Ou 華耦 of Sung came [to Lu] to make a covenant" and said his ancestor "was a criminal with [Duke Shang of] Sung . . . the people of Lu considered him to be respectful and exact."²⁴ Now, in having the dull-witted [people of Lu] "consider him respectful and exact," the historian makes clear [without saying so] that this is what sages and the enlightened would laugh at—this is cutting down on sentences. The *Spring and Autumn* says, "There fell stones in Sung—five."²⁵ Now, one hears them: "fell"; one looks at them: "stones"; one counts them: "five"—to add one word would make it too detailed, and to subtract one word would make it too cursory. To seek the middle course—simple, essential, and in accord with the principle of things—this is cutting down on words.

To cite examples which are opposite to this: Ku-liang 穀梁 called "Ch'ih K'o 郗克 a squinter, Chi-sun Hsing-fu 季孫行父 bald, and Sun Liang-fu 孫良夫 lame . . .

²²This is Liu's summary of the following, as translated by Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian of China* (New York, 1961), II. 216:

The Grand Historian remarks: Su Chien has told me that he once reprimanded the general-in-chief Wei Ch'ing for the fact that, although he occupied a position of honor and trust, he enjoyed no praise among the worthy men of the empire. "You should observe how the famous generals of antiquity worked to select and promote men of worth, and strive to imitate their example!" Su Chien told him. But General Wei Ch'ing declined to accept the advice, saying, "Ever since Tou Ying and T'ien Fen by their generosity gathered together their own groups of followers and caused such trouble, the Son of Heaven has been enraged

at the thought of anyone doing such a thing. It is the prerogative of the ruler of men to attract others to his service and to decide who is worthy of promotion and who is not. An official's job is simply to obey the laws and fulfill the duties of his post and that is all. What has he to do with the promotion of others?

Ho Chü-ping was apparently of the same opinion. That is the kind of generals they were.

²³Translation of Dubs, *op. cit.*, I. 274. This passage comes in the midst of the eulogy, which lists many benevolent acts of the emperor, and is probably selected by Liu to epitomize the whole eulogy.

²⁴Legge, 270-71.

²⁵Legge's translation, V. 170 (Duke Hsi, 16th yr.).

Ch'i sent a lame one to greet the lame one, a bald one to greet the bald one, a squinter to greet the squinter."²⁶ It probably would have been suitable to expunge the lines after "the lame one" and merely say "each greeted the other according to his kind." If one narrates every event repeatedly, it makes for particular waste in the writing—this is having too many sentences.

In the Vitagraph of Chang Ts'ang 張蒼 [256-152 B.C.] in the *Han Documents*, it says, "He was old in years and had no teeth in his mouth." Probably in this sentence it would have been acceptable to take out "in years" and "in his mouth." Here the sentence is made up of six characters, but three of them are carelessly added—this is having too many words.

All the same, cutting down on sentences is easy, but cutting down on words is difficult. Once one penetrates this central truth, he can talk about history.

If the sentences are entirely superfluous and the words all repetitive, it will give rise to chaotic complexity in historical writing. In baiting a large fish, one lets down a thousand hooks, but gets it in a single bamboo creel. In catching a high-flying bird, one stretches ten thousand nets, but snares it in a single mesh. Now, in narration of events, one is apt to add random words needlessly or liberally increase the idle talk. But if one must extract the essential, it will be no more than a phrase or sentence. If one can be like the hunter or fisher, having set out nets and hooks, one must put them away again, so that what remains is only one creel or mesh. Then it may be expected that all the superfluous growths will be trimmed and all the dirt removed; the flowers will be gone while the fruits remain; the dregs will have been purged and the juice left behind.

Alas! If in writing we could only delete even more where something can be deleted and make even deeper that which can be made deep. Wheelwright P'ien could not say how he used his axe, and Yi Chih could not put into words what went on in the cooking pot.²⁷

²⁶*Ku-liang chuan*, Duke Ch'eng, 1st yr. Ssu-pu pei-yao ed., 17.2b.

²⁷For the Wheelwright parable, see Burton Watson, tr., *The Complete Works of Chuang-tzu* (New York, 1968), 152-53. For Yi Chih, see *Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu* 呂氏春秋, Ssu-pu pei-yao ed., 14.5. Both stories

concern the inadequacy of language to convey consummate and intuitional skill. Liu is using them either to lament his own inability to teach what he knows about writing, or to say that, since language covers up more than it reveals, the historian should try to make his point using as little language as possible.

(For Chinese text see pages 196-197)



Burton Watson

Perhaps more than any individual working on Asian studies in the West, Burton Watson has devoted his time and considerable talents to translation. He ranks high among the more prolific translators of Chinese classics into English now functioning, and his energies have overflowed into the adjacent areas of Japanese literature and Japanese literature in Chinese. His works range broadly through History, Poetry, and Philosophy. Among the some 20 volumes of studies and

translations he has published are: *Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Grand Historian of China* (1958), *Records of the Historian: Chapters from the Shih-chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien* (1961), *Early Chinese Literature* (1962), *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the Former Han* (1974); *Chinese Rhyme-Prose* (賦) (1971), the poems of Su Tung-p'o, Lu Yu, and Han Shan; and the philosophical works of Hsün-tzu, Chuang-tzu, Moh-tzu, and Han Fei-tzu. His recent books include the 2-volume *Japanese Literature in Chinese* (Columbia, 1975/76) and *From the Country of Eight Islands*, an anthology of Japanese poetry, translated in collaboration with Hiroaki Sato (Doubleday/University of Washington Press, 1981).

Prof. Watson has taught Chinese and Japanese literature at Columbia, Stanford, and Kyoto Universities. Since 1973, while holding the title of Adjunct Professor of East Asian Languages & Cultures at Columbia, he has been residing in Japan and "making a living as a translator." In 1979, Mr. Watson received the Gold Medal Award of the Translation Center at Columbia University.

On that occasion, he remarked: "I began trying my hand at translation from Chinese and Japanese as soon as I had learned how to read the languages. In fact, rather sooner as I now think on it. I eagerly showed my translations to anyone who would look at them and sent them here and there. They all came back. . . . I remember with some chagrin that I even typed up some of my poems and sent them to Ezra Pound. Mr. Pound very kindly acknowledged receipt of them and explained that he was not the person to make judgments on translations of young translators of Chinese. He did, however, gave me the names of journals where I might submit them. . . ."

"We all know how quickly translations date. I am under no illusions about my own work. But I do feel that if my work appeals to younger readers . . . perhaps, it will have a chance to be around for a time."*

**TRANSLATION, The Journal of Literary Translation*, Volume VII, New York City, Fall 1980, p. 279.