The Analysis of Celestial Phenomena Records in Records of the Grand Historian and Sima Qian's Thought on the Interaction Between Heaven and Man

Yeran Yan

Chinese Language and Literature, Nanchang Normal College of Applied Technology, Jiangxi, China

yyranwl@outlook.com

Abstract. The astronomical records in *Records of the Grand Historian* construct Sima Qian's systematic philosophy of the relationship between Heaven and humanity. Although existing scholarship has examined the functional aspects of astronomical descriptions in *Records of the Grand Historian*, further investigation remains warranted into the complexity of Sima Qian's thought embedded therein and its broader historiographical significance. Accordingly, this study takes the astronomical records in *Records of the Grand Historian* as its entry point to examine Sima Qian's cosmological–humanistic philosophy and its historiographical significance. Through textual analysis and synthesis, this study finds that the astronomical records in *Records of the Grand Historian*, particularly those concentrated in the chapter *Treatise on Celestial Offices*, had already formed a relatively systematic framework of stellar phenomena. Celestial phenomena also served multiple functions, including legitimizing imperial authority, foretelling auspicious or calamitous events, and accentuating the destinies of key figures. On the intellectual level, Sima Qian both inherited the traditional concept of "interaction between Heaven and humanity" and demonstrated a rational skepticism toward the Way of Heaven, ultimately arriving at an emphasis on the decisive role of human agency in historical development. Research indicates that Sima Qian, through his astronomical records, provided a tool of public opinion to constrain imperial power, established a humanistic spirit in historiography, and set a precedent for later generations that emphasized empirical evidence and scientific rationality in historical scholarship. This has exerted a profound influence on Chinese historiography.

Keywords: celestial phenomena; *Records of the Grand Historian*; Sima Qian; philosophy of Heaven and man.

1. Introduction

As far as ancient Chinese literature is concerned, *Records of the Grand Historian* stands out as the very first pioneering biographical general history work, which has both precious historiographical and literary values. The *Records of the Grand Historian* deals with a huge scope, with a range of themes and topics that is exceptional. A lot of space in this monumental work is filled with the description of celestial events, which is why the text has quite a large research value. Contemporary scholarship mostly agrees that the *Records of the Grand Historian* should be approached, when dealing with the writing of celestial phenomena, from the perspective of Sima Qian's concept of the relationship between Heaven and humanity. Based on that, following the studies, they either center on the astronomical anomalies mentioned by Sima Qian in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, categorizing them by type of celestial events, or the emphasis is placed on Sima Qian's focus on logical human affairs, claiming that he was a simple materialist [1,2]. These studies offer valuable insights for the current topic of inquiry, yet they are not without certain limitations. Appropriately portraying Sima Qian's conceptualization of the connection between heaven and man and avoiding a simplistic definition is a difficult task. This way one might overlook such a serious contradiction in the *Records of the Grand Historian*. For example, the records contain accounts of aberrations in the heavens as well as Sima Qian's own reflections on the mistakes of Heaven's course. This contradiction is the very basis for the research of the apparent complexity of Sima Qian's distant ideas on the relationship between heaven and humanity.

This research goes into the depth of Sima Qian's intricately conceived Heaven-Humanity philosophy, the aim being to demonstrate how his thoughts on the interrelation between Heaven and humanity are uniquely different and the resulting profound impact on Chinese historiography. This research explores the relationship between heavenly appearances and historical events in the official history of ancient China, particularly in the *Records of the Grand Historian*. A literature analysis method will be adopted to assess related materials. It connects celestial phenomena with imperial power, personnel matters, and destiny. In this regard, it goes on to investigate the implication and attributes of Sima Qian's concept of the relationship between heaven and humanity, and consequently deepens the understanding of the historical value of his thought and reflects Sima Qian's rational spirit and concern for humanity as a great historian.

2. The Specific Content and Core Functions of the Depiction of Celestial Phenomena in Records of the Grand Historian

2.1. Systematic Body of Astronomical Knowledge

Treatise on Celestial Officials offers a comprehensive synthesis of astronomical content, standing as a culmination of early Chinese astronomy. It encapsulates the fundamental aim of Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*: "to investigate the relationship between Heaven and humanity [3]." The *Treatise on Celestial Officials* provides a detailed account of various astronomical knowledge, categorizing celestial phenomena into two types: regular and anomalous. Regular celestial phenomena refer to the normal patterns of celestial bodies, such as the daily rising of the sun in the east and its setting in the west. Anomalous celestial phenomena, on the other hand, encompass unusual changes in the sky, including solar eclipses, lunar eclipses, and the appearance of comets.

In his accounts of regular celestial phenomena, Sima Qian established a systematic astronomical framework. "The Celestial Pole Star in the Central Palace, the brightest among them, is the permanent dwelling place of Taiyi [4]." Sima Qian conceptualized Taiyi as the paramount celestial deity. Drawing a parallel with the rigorously structured empires of the human realm, the cosmos itself was envisioned as an equally well-ordered celestial empire. Consequently, Taiyi, much like an earthly emperor commanding his subjects, was believed to regulate the orbital patterns of the sun, moon and the twenty-eight lunar mansions [5]. This meticulous record-keeping, while undeniably motivated by the responsibilities of official historians, also encompassed a profound intention to establish an enduring frame of reference for the entirety of human history. In the *Treatise on Celestial Officials*, celestial phenomena are intricately connected with specific terrestrial matters, notably through the Field Division (Chinese astro-geographical system). This theory establishes a correspondence between celestial constellations and terrestrial regions, serving to prognosticate human fortunes and misfortunes. These systematic conventional celestial frameworks established a grand cosmic backdrop for Sima Qian's historical narrative in the *Records of the Grand Historian*.

Beyond routine celestial phenomena, the *Records of the Grand Historian* also encompasses extensive descriptions of anomalous astronomical events, including solar eclipses, lunar eclipses, comets, and Mars station in Antares. *The Basic Annals of Qin Shi Huang* records: "In the thirty-sixth year of his reign, Mars stationed at the Heart [4]." The Heart Mansion, serving as the representative constellation of the Azure Dragon of the East, symbolized the Heavenly King and the Son of Heaven. Conversely, the approach of Mars to the Heart Mansion was regarded as a highly ominous omen, frequently portending a major catastrophe for the emperor or the nation. These anomalous celestial phenomena were not isolated occurrences; rather, they were intricately linked with historical events, serving as a distinctive interpretive lens for Sima Qian's understanding of history. For example, the phrase "As for the eclipse, it will be unlucky for the place corresponding to it" indicates that, according to past beliefs, solar eclipses were associated with misfortune for the state [4].

2.2. The Function of Celestial Phenomena Records

2.2.1 Constructing imperial legitimacy

In the historical narrative of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, celestial phenomena serve a prominent function: symbolizing the Mandate of Heaven. In other words, celestial phenomena are intimately linked with imperial rule. As recorded in *The Basic Annals of Emperor Gaozu*, the legendary accounts of Liu Bang's birth and early life were filled with auspicious signs: a dragon was said to have appeared when his mother conceived him, and later, people regularly observed a dragon hovering above him, accompanied by a rising halo of vapor and clouds, which augured his extraordinary future [6]. Furthermore, with the advent of the Han dynasty, a propitious celestial alignment occurred, specifically the convergence of the five planets in the Eastern Well (Dongjing) constellation. This demonstrated that Liu Bang's birth was in accordance with Heaven's will, and his succession to the imperial throne was likewise a divine decree. He was thus indisputably the Chosen Son of Heaven.

The recording and interpretation of such celestial phenomena played a crucial role in establishing the legitimacy of imperial power. In the historical context of that time, the Mandate of Heaven was regarded by the common people as an irresistible and deeply authoritative force. Coupled with the numerous legendary anomalies associated with the birth of emperors, this cultivated an aura of inviolable sanctity around the emperor himself. This significantly reinforced the ideology of the divine right of kings, thereby consolidating the legitimacy and orthodoxy of political rule [7].

2.2.2 Presage blessings and calamities and warn of human affairs

In many cases, celestial phenomena serve as a reflection of human events. In the *Treatise on Celestial Officials,* the movement of Mars is always linked to the governor's virtue and the occurrence of disasters, and the celestial phenomena that do not conform to common sense are the alarms from Heaven, which the monarch must respond to and strike. If the monarch does not respond or take action, there will inevitably be a major disaster for the state. It is clearly recorded in *The Basic Annals of Emperor Xiaowen* that, influenced by repeated solar eclipses, the emperor believed that these were calamities from Heaven and regarded them as warnings from Heaven, so he interpreted his governance was not good and issued an imperial edict of introspection to listen to himself. In *The Hereditary House of the Grand Duke of Qi,* Yan Ying used the opportunity of the comet of disaster to chide Duke Jing not to impose heavy penalties and taxes [8].

Sima Qian showed that specific historical events were recorded by him, and celestial phenomena can foretell both auspiciousness and calamity, and alert people regarding their deeds. At the same time, this celestial phenomenon also warns the later rulers that it is necessary to cultivate virtue and implement good policies to maintain the mandate of heaven.

2.2.3 Highlight the trajectory of a character's fate

Celestial phenomena can be seen as a future event to human fate. In the historical works of *The Basic Annals of Xiang Yu*, it was Heaven's will that had brought Xiang Yu's death [4]. While Sima Qian considered it utter nonsense, he still created an environment of tragic grandeur in his writing by describing the entourage of demise and bad fortune through the background description, so that readers would feel the complex inner world of the tragic hero when facing their predestined path. *The Basic Annals of Qin Shi* Huang not only record that Mars was stationed in Antares, but also record the occurrence of a meteorite [4]. The fall of a meteorite was naturally regarded as an ominous sign. In addition, the stone founded by the impact was surprisingly inscribed in a wonderful way. The words inscribed on the stone directly foretold the death of Qin Shi Huang and the fracture of the state. These series of celestial phenomena have been precisely linked to the fate of the suspects, thus highlighting the dramatic tension and emotional impact of their stories. This shows that Sima Qian was not just historical recorders, but he has coordinated history and literature very splendidly.

3. The Intrinsic Nature and Distinctive Features of Sima Qian's Conception of Heaven and Man

3.1. Inheritance of Traditional Concepts

In the era of Emperor Wu of Han, Dong Zhongshu's doctrine of "Heaven-Human Interaction" rose to prominence as the dominant ideology. Furthermore, Sima Qian himself was profoundly influenced by Confucian thought and had sought instruction from Dong Zhongshu. Consequently, within this overarching historical and intellectual climate, his writings inevitably bore the distinct imprint of the prevailing ideology of the Western Han dynasty. The extensive accounts in the *Records of the Grand Historian* detailing the correspondence between celestial phenomena and human affairs suggest Sima Qian's belief that Heaven possessed consciousness and could warn humanity through omens and calamities. In order to uphold the unified dynasty, he organized historical events based on the notion of the Mandate of Heaven, while also inheriting ideas that had been prevalent since the pre-Qin period. In *The Hereditary House of Marquis Liu*, Zhang Liang exclaimed that Liu Bang was likely the Son of Heaven, divinely bestowed upon them [4]. *The Hereditary House of the Imperial In-Laws* recount that after the extermination of the Lü clan and Liu Heng's ascension to the throne, Sima Qian lamented, "If it were not for Heaven's mandate, who could have borne such a weighty responsibility [4]?" From these accounts, it is discernible that Sima Qian maintained traditional philosophical views, positing an intimate connection between imperial authority and the Mandate of Heaven [9].

3.2. Rational Doubts about the Relationship between Heaven and Man

Sima Qian did not confine himself to a single school of thought; rather, he approached historical facts with a spirit of rational inquiry and a comprehensive, inclusive perspective. His critical spirit found its culmination in *The Collective Biographies of Boyi and Shuqi.* Ancient wisdom holds that Heaven, impartial to all, often bestows its grace upon those who walk in harmony with the celestial order. Regarding this, Sima Qian posed a fundamental question: Bo Yi and Shu Qi, individuals of such exemplary moral integrity, were left to starve to death; Yan Hui, a paragon of diligence and learning, suffered an untimely demise; yet a ruthless and wicked brigand like Dao Zhi managed to accumulate wealth, indulge in pleasures, and live to a ripe old age. Such brutal historical realities caused him to profoundly question the Way of Heaven. This led him to ponder: if this purported cosmic principle truly exists, is its nature inherently righteous or unrighteous [4]? This form of inquiry, grounded in historical facts and personal reflection, demonstrates that Sima Qian broke free from the constraints of fatalism. Rather than passively conforming to the Mandate of Heaven, he critically examined whether the Way of Heaven was just and equitable.

3.3. Emphasize the Decisive Role of Humans

Sima Qian's philosophy of Heaven and humanity highlights the centrality of human agency. According to Sima Qian, while celestial phenomena could forewarn human events, they did not dictate them. He asserted that the most crucial aspect was the full exercise of human agency [10]. Sima Qian dismissed as fallacious the explanations offered for Xiang Yu's defeat, arguing instead that its fundamental causes lay in Xiang Yu's inherent character flaws and strategic political misjudgments, rather than being simply a matter of divine predestination. The phrase "Are kings and nobles, generals and ministers endowed by Nature with their titles" from *The Hereditary House of Chen She* directly challenges the doctrine of predestination [4]. It proclaimed that an individual's status and destiny are not predetermined by divine will, but can instead be achieved and reshaped through their own diligent efforts. This perfectly encapsulates Sima Qian's historical perspective, which underscores the decisive role of human agency. Moreover, this very concept has profoundly influenced the shaping of the Chinese nation's distinctive characteristics, fostering its diligence, stability, pragmatism, and enterprising spirit.

4. The Value of Sima Qian's Heaven-Man Thought

4.1. An Effective Public Opinion Tool to Constrain Imperial Authority

The concept of the Mandate of Heaven, as presented in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, provided later generations with a theoretical foundation for remonstrance, thereby effectively constraining imperial power. In the *Records of the Grand Historian*, Sima Qian explicitly stated that emperors should cultivate their virtue and implement benevolent governance when abnormal celestial phenomena occurred. He ingeniously transformed these natural occurrences into a legitimate basis for critiquing political realities. As recounted in *The Hereditary House of King Goujian of Yue* chapter of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, when Zhuangzi (Master Zhuang) was granted an audience with the King of Chu in the palace, he observed that the position of a particular celestial body portended misfortune for the State of Chu. Zhuangzi contended that only through benevolent conduct could such calamities be averted, and he therefore admonished the King of Chu to implement virtuous governance [4].

Sima Qian realized that the mandate of Heaven was the legitimate power of the monarch, but he pointed out that this mandate could not be permanently valid, nor could it be completely superseded. A "Sword of Damocles" is hung on the head of a virtuous emperor, and Heaven will warn kings who act in violation of virtue through abnormal celestial phenomena. If the rulers continue to ignore these warnings, it will finally cause the people to suffer, and national disaster will inevitably occur. This idea placed imperial power under the constraints of morality, allowing posterity to have a divine and justifiable right to advise, and at the same time, it provided a powerful weapon of public speech to restrain the autocracy of the emperor.

4.2. Establishing a Historiographical Spirit Centered on the Human Element

Although *Records of the Grand Historian* records numerous anomalous celestial phenomena and extraordinary occurrences, its fundamental breakthrough lies in shifting the narrative focus onto human beings. In *The Biographies of Bai Qi and Wang Jian*, when the King of Qin commanded Bai Qi to commit suicide, he sighed, lamenting that he did not know when he had offended Heaven to deserve such a fate. However, Bai Qi, with his sword held aloft, remained silent for a considerable period before stating, "I deserve to die. After the Battle of Changping, hundreds of thousands of enemy soldiers surrendered to us, but I deceived them and then buried them alive. That alone is enough reason for me to die [4]." Although Bai Qi initially voiced his contention against the perceived injustice of Heaven's decree, his questioning of divine authority was swiftly succeeded by profound self-reflection. He came to understand that his current predicament was not a divine punishment, but rather the direct consequence of his own past misdeeds and transgressions [11]. Bai Qi's realization also demonstrated that the fundamental cause of the tragedy lay in human actions, rather than divine will.

Although Sima Qian retained the celestial phenomena and the mandate of Heaven, he was not bound by these ideas. Instead, his attention was shifted to the affairs and characters of people. Through a certain person's story, it is clearly shown that the rise and fall of a country, the success and failure of an individual, in the final analysis, depend on the character and specific actual deeds of the parties concerned. In the face of a certain occurrence, one should not wait for fate passively, but should bring into full play the decisive role of personality. Thus, it was established that China's historiography focused on human affairs.

4.3. A Model of Scientific and Rational Spirit

The creation of *Records of the Grand Historian* also established a paradigm of rationality and science for later historiography. Sima Qian's concept of the relationship between Heaven and man is not equal to metaphysics, and he attaches great importance to the scientific nature of *Records of the Grand Historian*. Sima Qian distinguishes reliable documents, such as *The Book of Document*s, from various schools'fallacies and legends. He maintains a cautious attitude toward the ancient events

involving the Yellow Emperor and others, opposing uncritical and blind belief. When composing *The Basic Annals of the Five Emperors*, Sima Qian fully absorbed the writings of various scholars, digested and sorted them out, and selected elegant and credible expressions [4].

When Sima Qian faced numerous historical materials, he never took them and wrote them down casually but scrupulously tried to reveal the verifiable materials, often through field investigation and collection of evidences. Thus, when Sima Qian began to write about Han Xin's achievements, he went to Han Xin's hometown by himself and found a lot of information to apply to supplement and verify actual history. He also went to his mother's grave, where he performed site investigations to verify the accuracy of unknown history in Han Xin's birthplace. Sima Qian's methods of dealing with historical materials were marked by a sincere search for truth, practical realism, and scientific rationality. It established a distinguished tradition in Chinese historiography that relied heavily on facts, which is still very significant today.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, this article, in a comprehensive and structured manner, delineates the celestial events recorded in the *Records of the Grand Historian* and the full import of Sima Qian's philosophy regarding the relationship between Heaven and humanity. This study has indicated that the routine celestial events in the *Records of the Grand Historian* laid the foundation of order, while the unusual celestial phenomena became the narrative device for the evaluation of human matters. On this basis, the paper continues to delve into the ultimate essence of Sima Qian's thought on Heaven and humanity. In this respect, he takes the inherited traditional notion of the unity of Heaven and humanity, but he makes an in-depth review of the natural way of Heaven by taking the actual history as the standard, and he completes the historical transposition to the center of human agency. This research can be viewed as both a revelation of the various complexities of Sima Qian's historical writing and the monumental meaning behind his thoughts. The conception of the Mandate of Heaven presented the theoretical ground for limiting the powers of the emperors in politics. On the ideational level, it underscored a naturalistic history of humankind with the agents as the focal point, which inescapably left the later historiography with an indelible impress.

This present study is not immune to enlargement. The subsequent research could consist of a thorough comparative study of the Records *of the Grand Historian* with some other historical works, or it could deal with the astronomical events described therein using our modern astronomical knowledge. The deep insights in the interaction between Heaven and humanity abundant in Sima Qian's philosophy are still of practical value now. This study is perceived as a modern reincarnation of this perspective, and further exploration of this idea by more scholars in this field is expected.

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