

The Multi-Faceted Nature of "Flying General": A Comparative Study of The Biography of General Li in Records of the Grand Historian and The Biography of Li Guang and Su Jian in The Book of Han

Yixiao Chen*

School of History and Culture, Hebei Normal University, Hebei, 050024, China

*Corresponding author: yixiao0830@gmail.com

Abstract. The two books, *The Book of Han* and *Records of the Grand Historian*, have a high degree of overlap in terms of depicting characters and recording time periods, but there are still many differences between them in minor details. This is due to the different eras in which the two books were compiled and the different times and identities of the authors. Therefore, the two books are often used for comparative studies. This article conducts relevant research on the depiction of the character Li Guang in the biographies of General Li in *Records of the Grand Historian* and Su Guang in the *The Book of Han*. By comparing the different descriptions of the same character in the two books, it studies the differences in the historians' positions and narrative forms, as well as the underlying reasons for these differences. The research is carried out through the application of the methods of reading historical materials and comparison. The research finds that the differences in the descriptions of Li Guang mainly result from the authors' different life experiences and writing purposes. *Records of the Grand Historian* was mainly written by Sima Qian to record the true history in his eyes, while *The Book of Han* was composed for the royal family. Through comparative studies, a deeper understanding of the author himself and the related history of the Qin and Han dynasties can be achieved.

Keywords: *Records of the Grand Historian*; *The Book of Han*; Li Guang; Sima Qian; Ban Gu.

1. Introduction

Li Guang, a renowned general of the Western Han Dynasty, witnessed the succession of three emperors in the Han Dynasty. During each emperor's reign, he achieved remarkable military feats and played a significant role in the Han Dynasty's suppression of the Xiongnu. In people's hearts, Li Guang was mostly a valiant and skilled soldier. Both *Records of the Grand Historian* and *The Book of Han* have different accounts of this hero. Neither of them merely focuses on his bravery and prowess in battle, but rather chooses to explore more aspects of this general from the perspective of his combat skills. Sima Qian focused his pen on Li Guang's unfair fate, while Ban Gu concentrated his attention on his effective military governance. For Li Guang, the two authors have different focuses. Sima Qian portrays him as a soldier with a touch of pathos, while Ban Gu portrays him as a general with remarkable military achievements but also with some flaws. It is worth discussing the difference of emphasis in Li Guang's description between them. Previous studies have mostly focused on the differences in the specific writing structures and language usage of articles in *Records of the Grand Historian* and *The Book of Han* [1,2]. Or it may focus on the differences in narrative styles, but less on the reasons for the differences in authors' writing from the perspective of historians and narrative forms [3-5]. This article will attempt to start from these two aspects by exploring and study the reasons for the differences in the portrayal of Li Guang's image between the two.

The characters depicted in the books *The Book of Han* and *Records of the Grand Historian* are mostly the same and the recorded time periods are highly overlapping. However, due to the many differences in the details between the two, they can be discussed and analyzed. This research is of great significance for the reasons for the compilation of *Records of the Grand Historian* and *The Book of Han*, as well as the characters' personalities and attitudes towards life. It can help readers better enrich their understanding of Sima Qian and Ban Gu, and make their images in the minds of modern

readers more complete. This study mainly conducts relevant research based on the descriptions of the character Li Guang in Biographies of General Li in *Records of the Grand Historian* and Biographies of Su Guang in *The Book of Han*. The specific elaboration is carried out by comparing the different descriptions of the same character image in the two books. The literature analysis method was employed to search for and read relevant materials and literature, and at the same time, the comparison method was used to conduct comparative studies on relevant literature fragments. The advantage of this method lies in its ability to accurately analyze the causes of the relevant differences, which is conducive to the progress of the research. The ultimate research objective of this study is to investigate the differences between the two in terms of historians' positions and narrative forms, as well as the reasons for these differences. To achieve this goal, historical material reading and comparative studies were conducted.

2. Literature Review

Dai Junlu's Discussion on Emotional Tendencies in the Biographies of *Records of the Grand Historian*: Taking The Biographies of General Li as an Example This article studies Sima Qian's portrayal of Li Guang's character. It contributes to this research by integrating Sima Qian's own emotions into his depiction of Li Guang, but it does not delve much into the narrative form [6].

In Yang Zhi's article, *Interpretation of Sima Qian's 'Right Side Li Guang and Left Side Wei and Huo behind Numerical Odd and Heavenly Fortune'*, he studied Sima Qian's spirit of writing straightforness and events verification in the documentary, making contributions to this research in terms of the author's writing stance. However, he did not delve much into the narrative form. This article fills the existing research gap in this aspect [7].

In his article *On Sima Qian's 'Defense' Art from the Biographies of Qu Yuan and General Li*, Zhou Sheng studied the writing techniques employed by Sima Qian when depicting Qu Yuan and Li Guang. He made contributions to this research in terms of writing techniques and narrative forms, but did not delve much into the author's writing stance [8].

In the article *The Biography of General Li by Sima Qian*, Luo Geng studied the idea of the interaction between heaven and man that Sima Qian demonstrated when depicting the character of Li Guang. He made a contribution to this research in terms of the author's writing stance, but did not delve much into the narrative form [9].

To sum up, most previous studies have focused on two major aspects of writing: writing techniques and analyzing the author's emotions. There is relatively little research on the differences in the author's historical stance and narrative form, leaving some gaps. Therefore, this article will focus on these two aspects to conduct a comparative study of *Records of the Grand Historian* and *The Book of Han*.

3. Analysis

3.1. Different Writing Positions

Although Ban Gu and Sima Qian, the two authors, describe historical facts of the same period, their personal backgrounds are quite different. In his letter to Ren An, Sima Qian once expressed his attitude towards life: "I also wish to explore the relationship between heaven and man and understand the changes of ancient and modern times." [10]. He believes that studying the relationship between natural phenomena and human society requires a thorough understanding of the historical changes throughout history. This sentence greatly reflects Sima Qian's core attitude towards writing. This also indicates its attempt to break through the theory of the interaction between heaven and man that was the trend of The Times in the Han Dynasty. He believes that the analysis of history should be more realistic and should break free from the trap of superstition. Therefore, he incorporated more of his own emotions into his writing.

And Ban Gu, as a staunch advocate of the Han Dynasty. He wrote *The Book of Han* in order to promote the orthodoxy of the Han Dynasty and promote the feudal morality of Confucianism, hoping

that it could be a book to preserve the history of the Han Dynasty. His focus was on promoting the Han Dynasty, so his works placed more emphasis on ethics and moral principles. It more prominently reflects the solemn and precious appearance of the Han Dynasty's royal family. This book was written by the Han royal family for future generations. Therefore, what contemporary historians need to do is to create an extremely perfect royal family for the Han Dynasty for future generations to admire and respect. Compared with *Records of the Grand Historian*, the descriptions in *The Book of Han* show much less of the author's personal emotions, and when evaluating history, it attaches great importance to the order of hierarchy and the principles of propriety and law.

The differences between the two are well reflected in the depiction of Li Guang. For instance, when describing Emperor Wen of Han's evaluation of Li Guang, Sima Qian used more modal particles and exclamation marks in his language, making the entire sentence appear more cadenced and fluctuating. "Alas, I didn't meet you at the right time!" [10]. This sentence translates into modern language is "What a pity! You were born at the wrong time!" This is Emperor Wen of Han's sentiment towards Li Guang, the sentiment that a hero is born at the wrong time. In essence, it comes from people's true inner thoughts and is the external manifestation of the most common human emotions in people's hearts. The addition of exclamation marks and interjections can better reflect the emperor's regret for Li Guang and also make the character of Emperor Wen of Han more vivid. At the same time, in this sigh, there must also be Sima Qian's lament over the injustice of his own fate. He originally had a heart full of passion, but like Li Guang, he was born at the wrong time and was forced to endure the pain of castration. This sentence was spoken by Sima Qian through the mouth of Emperor Wen of Han, expressing his own tragic cry about himself.

Ban Gu's account of this sentence is more straightforward compared to Sima Qian's. The interjections and exclamation marks are only used once at the end. Emperor Wen said, "It's a pity that Guang is not at the right time. If he is ordered to live in the era of Emperor Gaozu, how could he be a marquis of ten thousand households?" [11]. The description of the Chinese Emperor Wen's language is much more about the shaping of the majestic image of the emperor. In Ban Gu's heart, the image of an emperor is majestic. Meanwhile, Ban Gu existed as a historian of the Han royal family, and the words he wrote served the ruling class of the Han royal family. For this reason, he was bound to be unable to incorporate his own emotions into his writing. As mentioned earlier, when Ban Gu evaluated history, he would always pay attention to ethics and moral principles, all of which served the imperial family. What he cared about was the order of hierarchy, believing that emperors should not show their emotions on their faces and that the impression they left on future generations should also be composed. Therefore, in Emperor Wen of Han's description of Li Guang's evaluation, he did not add too many modal particles or exclamation marks. This not only reflects his reverence for the royal family but also demonstrates the royal family's need to shape its own great image.

3.2. Differences in Narrative Forms

The differences between Biographies of General Li in *Records of the Grand Historian* and Biographies of Li Guangsu in *The Book of Han* can be seen from the titles. Sima Qian singled out Li Guang for description, while Ban Gu placed Li Guang, Su Jian and Su Wu together to describe the relevant content. The separate description of Li Guang reflects Sima Qian's concern for this character. Ban Gu's portrayal of the three together is not because their life experiences are particularly similar, but to better compare their related experiences and thereby better shape the fine image of the Han royal family.

Sima Qian's description of Li Guang is comprehensive and tragic. He gives a detailed account of Li Guang's life. He starts with the comments of the people of the dynasty on Li Guang. The author first praises Li Guang's bravery and fearlessness, but at the same time points out that he was born at the wrong time, from having remarkable military achievements to working in vain and finally being forced to death. The author used the phrase "Then draw the knife and commit suicide. All the scholar-officials of the Guangjun army wept. When the common people heard this, whether they knew it or not, the elderly and the strong all wept." At the end of this paragraph [10]. The author's description

reveals that almost everyone felt sad for Li Guang upon learning of his death. This reflects the tragic color of Li Guang's life and, in a roundabout way, shows readers the coldness of Li Guang who was popular among the people but was not valued or even discarded by the imperial court. It reflects Sima Qian's sympathy for him, and also contains Sima Qian's sentiment that his fate is extremely similar to Li Guang's. Like Li Guang, he was full of ambition, but he was not highly valued by the imperial court and even showed signs of being targeted. He passionately defended the meritorious officials of the court, but failed to gain the understanding of the royal family. All he got in return was the painful castration. From the author's words, one can also see the author's indignation towards Li Guang and himself, his criticism of the relevant political system at that time, and his resentment towards the ruling class behind the unfair political system.

Ban Gu's description of Li Guang is slightly different from that of Sima Qian. Ban Gu wrote three characters together in a biography. By reading the relevant content, one can see the differences and changes in the author's attitude. Similarly, Ban Gu also described Li Guang's death - "When the common people heard about it, whether they knew it or not, the old and strong all wept." [11]. Unlike *Records of the Grand Historian*, he used declarative sentences, calmly stating the sadness people felt over Li Guang's death, without overly expressing his regret for Li Guang through his own words. It seems as if only a simple obituary was issued for an ordinary person in history, merely to inform the world that Li Guang had passed away and everyone could mourn for him. Immediately following this, he began to describe the related deeds of the other two characters. The biggest difference between these two characters and Li Guang was that although they were not initially favored by the imperial court or were demoted due to some misunderstandings, their endings were both good in the end. For instance, Su Wu's final outcome was as follows: "He was ordered to serve as a governor to pay homage to Emperor Wu's garden and temple, to be appointed as a vassal state, He held the position of prime minister, a reward of 2 million yuan, two hectares of public land, and a residence in one area." [11].

Although Su Wu led a very miserable life in the first half of his life and wrote the story of his herding sheep in history, he received excellent treatment after returning to the Han Dynasty and eventually passed away peacefully. By describing and comparing the ultimate fates of the two in this way, the image of the Han Dynasty royal family can be better maintained. It also indicates from the side that the rulers of the Han Dynasty fully possessed the political literacy and judgment to distinguish and affirm those with lofty aspirations. In the face of outstanding talents, whether young or old, as long as they were talented, they would be valued by the Han Dynasty and receive abundant rewards. Therefore, Li Guang was not given an important position merely because of his own reasons, not because the current rulers of the Han Dynasty did not appreciate him. Ban Gu uses a contrasting writing technique to present an image of a ruler who can quickly find talented people, which restores dignity to the Han Dynasty and ensures the authority of the Han royal family. Through Ban Gu's contrastive narrative, it makes people realize that the Han Dynasty was a dynasty that was good at discovering the talents of others, and could make good use of their talents, and treated talented people well. Under such shaping, the rulers of the Han Dynasty would also make people unconsciously overlook those insignificant flaws, leaving behind a flawless image of the Han Dynasty's rulers for future generations.

4. Discussion

The different depictions of the same character Li Guang in the *Records of the Grand Historian* and *The Book of Han* reflect that although they both narrate events of the Han Dynasty, the main themes they convey are quite different. Sima Qian wrote *Records of the Grand Historian* during the period when Emperor Wu of Han was expanding his power on a large scale. The social environment of this period was also influenced by the Taoists' idea that all things in nature are of the same kind and can interact with each other. After suffering humiliation, Sima Qian, in order to fulfill the dream left by his father and his own aspirations, privately compiled and completed this biography.

He was unwilling to be influenced by the idea that was widely popular in the Han Dynasty that humans and all things in nature were of the same kind and could interact with each other. He wanted to break free from this limitation and hoped that the *Records of the Grand Historian* could better reflect his emotions and thoughts. This writing attitude is also reflected many times in *Records of the Grand Historian*. It is precisely because of his persistence that Sima Qian left behind *Records of the Grand Historian* that will be remembered for all time. In this book, he wrote a separate biography for Li Guang, preserving his glorious military achievements and ensuring that this legendary general who dealt a heavy blow to the Xiongnu will be remembered for all time in history. At the same time, he also expressed his indignation and dissatisfaction with the contemporary system through Li Guang's story, ending with a tragic climax, which reflected his specific personal historical perspective and critical stance. However, Ban Gu wrote the History of the Han Dynasty at a time when the dynasty was in a state of rejuvenation and the royal family members were eager to restore the legislative order. He was entrusted by members of the royal family, and began to write *The Book of Han* based on the *Records of the Grand Historian*. In Ban Gu's account, He combined Li Guang, Su Jian and Su Wu in his writing. By using writing techniques such as contrast, he weakened the legendary color of Li Guang's glorious military achievements. Finally, he concluded Li Guang's tragedy with legal ethics, reinforcing the image of the Han royal family that values law over righteousness and is fair and strict. *Records of the Grand Historian* emphasizes human relationships and emotions, while *The Book of Han* focuses on shaping the image of the royal family. The differences between the two books are not only reflected in the style of the articles, but also in the personal emotions and writing purposes of the authors. The records in historical books are not always accurate, they might be products serving contemporary politics. The overlap between a historian's personal stance and the political situation often affects the final presentation of a book. Therefore, when reading history, one should not overlook the characteristics of The Times just because it is an official collection. Interpretation should take into account the author's personal stance and the background of The Times.

5. Conclusion

This study finds that Sima Qian's depiction of Li Guang, compared with Ban Gu's, better reflects his personal emotions and his specific historical perspective. In his depictions and reflections on Li Guang, Sima Qian also expressed his own feelings about the injustice of fate. In terms of language usage, Ban Gu was more official, better shaping the serious image of the royal family and more prominently demonstrating his service to the royal family.

Thus, it is further concluded that there are many reasons for the differences in writing between *Records of the Grand Historian* and *The Book of Han*. This article focuses on the gap between the personal stance of historians and their narrative forms. Ultimately, both of these aspects reflect the author's subjective attitude. Sima Qian angered Emperor Wu of Han for defending General Li Ling and was castrated. After experiencing tremendous changes in his life, he was determined to write *Records of the Grand Historian*. Sima Qian advocated breaking away from the concept of the interaction between heaven and man and writing historical records based on his own life experiences. When writing this Record of the Grand Historian, he couldn't help but add some of his own emotions, expressing his own feelings of melancholy and desolation through sympathy for the protagonist. *The Book of Han* was written by Ban Gu on behalf of the Han royal family based on the *Records of the Grand Historian*. Behind him was the royal family, and the purpose of writing this book was to compile a history for the royal family. Therefore, he must not incorporate personal emotions. The content of the royal family should be solemn and dignified. At the same time, since this historical book will also be used to present the situation of the Han Dynasty to future generations, in order to shape a good image for future generations, the Han court will naturally refine its language to ensure that what it presents to future generations is a perfect image of the royal family, thereby preserving its own dignity.

This research provides a great deal of valuable reference significance for future studies in this direction, mainly influenced by the research on the authors, their language usage and descriptions in *Records of the Grand Historian* and *The Book of Han*. Future research should focus more on in-depth exploration of the differences in the application of specific characters and punctuation marks.

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