On the Impartiality of the Historian and the Personal Opinions Expressed in the "Taishi Gong's Words" Sections of the Records of the Grand Historian

Biyan Zhang *

Chinese Language and Literature, Hunan University of Technology, Hunan, 412007, China

* Corresponding Author Email: zhangbiyan2023@outlook.com

Abstract. The current paper is intended to address the underlying academic debate around the phrase Tai Shi Gong words in the *Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian)* whether it formally is merely a continuation of the objective historical record-keeping, operating in accordance with the principle of veridical documentation, or it consists in subjective expression of personal experiences and value judgements. This discussion has a great value in deeply comprehending the pure historiographical intent of Sima Qian to found his own school of thought, comprehend the emergence and evolution of the Chinese historical discourse tradition, and cogitate the intricate connection of truth and biasness in historical discourse. The research mainly examines the two facets of the words of Taishi Gong and the inherent relationships between them. It utilizes textual analysis and case studies to systematically study the original *Records of the Grand Historian* as well as the other academic sources, and gives instances of critical analysis of the key chapters in particular *The Annals of Xiang Yu* and *The Biography of Bo Yi*. This is the best methodology of identifying issues of theoretical concern in a particular text and this gives solid grounds to debate. The results of the findings show that in his more page-by-page judgement of history; Sima Qian upheld the role of the historian but still incorporated the personal experience and judgement. And this proves, the dialectical unity of his impartiality and personal commentary, thus giving a complete interpretation of his practice: his thought of historiography.

Keywords: Sima Qian, Records of the Grand Historian, TaiShiGong's words, the historian's impartiality, personal discourse.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the core academic debate surrounding the pioneering historical commentary format "Taishi Gong's words" at the conclusion of *Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian)* chapters: whether it constitutes an extension of objective, truthful historical recording (the historian's impartiality) or a subjective expression of personal experiences and value judgements (personal discourse). Recent scholarship has deepened this discourse. As Hao Jianping and Hao Jiaxing in their overviews and, while continuing the classical debate, the field now employs increasingly diverse methodologies and places greater emphasis on textual mechanisms [1]. Notably,"– through comparative analysis of the "Praise said" sections in the *Book of Han* – explicitly identifies the fundamental characteristic of "Taishi Gong's words" as its subjectivity, systematically summarizing its evaluative pattern that reinforces the "self". These advances indicate that discerning this issue requires transcending simplistic dichotomies to explore the concrete fusion of subjective and objective elements within the text. Zhang Yutao's 2023 study on his "textual pattern methodology [2]. This analysis plays a key role in deeply understanding Sima Qian's historiographical goal of "establishing his own academic school", grasping the roots and evolution of China's historical commentary tradition, and thinking over the complicated ties between truth and bias in historical narration.

The research centres on the concrete manifestations and intrinsic connections of the dual attributes of "Taishi Gong's words". Employing textual analysis and case studies, it systematically examines the original *Shiji* and relevant scholarly literature, with in-depth analysis of pivotal chapters such as

The Annals of Xiang Yu and *The Biography of Bo Yi*. This methodology effectively discerns theoretical issues within specific texts, providing robust evidence for argumentation.

The primary objective of this paper is to elucidate the nature of words of Taishi Gong that are fundamental. To achieve this end, the research will take the critical reading and critical analysis approach. It will demonstrate two noteworthy tendencies of Sima Qian in his specific historical verdicts; one was that he was a historian and had had a mission of writing historically and the other was that he was also filtering his experiences in life and his personal judgments into his writing. The paper will thus reveal how inimitable a spirit of his personal commentary is closely related to his impartial spirit, as well as provide an in-depth insight into his practice and ideology as a historian.

2. Concept

The concept of the historian impartial spirit is a mix of a spiritual tradition which dates back deep into antiquity, of which the concept is called the historiographer impartial spirit of the Chinese that historians of the earlier periods used. Implicit in this idiosyncrasy is a paramount commitment to an uncompromising adherence to the truthful documentation--as such being not only an obligatory requirement of the procedure but also a controlling imperative of the individuals carrying out historiographical activities. Looked through the recordation procedures that these chroniclers instituted, it is possible to note that compliance with the system of power was not enough to discourage their adherence. Historians thus placed themselves in opposition to the current authority and faced with threats or unfavorable conditions sacrificed neither terror nor expedient concession. By thus basing their work primarily on factual accuracy, they have exhibited an unswerving commitment to truth that can be traced in official history wherein innumerable examples of the refusal to compromise truth in the face of an adversary can be witnessed. As revealed by Xianghui's pivotal research in *A New Exploration of the Original Meaning scholar Shen of 'Veritable Records'*, the essence terms were established by Ban Gu of the Han dynasty the Eastern as the lofty commendation of a historian's craft: "straightforward in its writing, accurate in its accounts, neither embellishing virtues nor concealing vices"[3]. During the Spring and Autumn period, the Jin state's historian Dong Hu defied the powerful minister Zhao Dun by recording "Zhao Dun murdered his sovereign." The brothers serving as chief historians of the Qi state successively risked their lives to document "Cui Zhu murdered his sovereign," forging the indomitable spirit of historians with their blood. As Grand Historian, Sima Qian consciously inherited this noble tradition. In his *Letter to Ren An*, he declared his resolve: "To explore the relationship between heaven and humanity, to understand the transformations of past and present, and to establish a school of thought of my own [4]." Here, the terms "explore" and "understand" precisely embody his "impartial spirit" of investigating historical patterns with objectivity and rationality.

Yet Sima Qian's greatness lay in transcending mere cold documentation. His aspiration to "establish his own school of thought" precisely carved legitimate space for the expression of "personal private discourse." This "private discourse" refers to the historian's personal emotions, value judgements, and scholarly perspectives shaped by his unique life experiences. These encompassed, but were not limited to: the pent-up grief and personal anguish stemming from the calamity of Li Ling; aesthetic preferences for specific figures (such as chivalrous knights and assassins) cultivated through extensive travels; and philosophical reflections on the injustice of heaven's ways and the capriciousness of fate. Such "private discourse" was not irresponsible emotional venting, but rather the product of a highly awakened historical consciousness—Sima Qian's conscious act of merging his life with history.

3. Upholding the Historian's Impartiality

Though afflicted by the calamity of Li Ling, Sima Qian's professional integrity and commitment to truth as a historian remained unshaken. The "historian's impartiality" formed the unshakeable rational foundation of the "Taishi Gong's words", manifesting in three specific ways.

First, this work fixes gaps in official historical records and saves original historical materials. Sima Qian clearly saw the problems with official archives. So, his writings often used information from his own investigations. He also got help from many people he knew in society. In the "Taishi Gong's words" parts, he kept a lot of very valuable original historical materials. In the *Biography of Marquis of Huaiyin*, he records: "When I visited Huaiyin, the people of Huaiyin told me..." and at the conclusion of the *Biography of Li Sheng and Lu Jia*, he notes: "The gentleman of Pingyuan was well acquainted with me, hence I was able to present a comprehensive account." As scholar Zhang Dake has summarized, this "investigation and networking" constituted a crucial method for constructing his historical knowledge system [5]. It was a process that rendered his commentaries highly valuable to add biographical information and to save popular memories. It was also a way of showing that the historian took an active responsibility of collecting scattered ancient stories all over the country.

Second, it demonstrates in the correspondence of real facts and falseness and adherence to the principle of verification whether facts are valid or not. When the events had variants, Sima Qian did not make arbitrary choices. Rather, he maintained a close mind of I do not know when doubting Laozi, and just in the book biographies of Laozi and Han Fei he said: The world knows not whether this is true or not. Throughout the "Grand Historian Commentary" of the Biography of Su Qin, he also continues to criticize the fact that the world cholesters have a lot to say about Su Qin all which are variated in so many ways, that when some historical circumstances resemble his actions, they are said to be his deeds. This strict control and checks of the source materials were the basic assurance of the credibility of his narrative. Scholar Zhao Shengqun emphasized in his Studies in the *Documentation of the Records of the Grand Historian* that this exemplified Sima Qian's scientific approach of "hearing much and doubting what is lacking," aimed at "preserving historical truth to the greatest extent possible." [6].

Finally, it is in the incorporation of praise and criticism in the story, the good in telling history without embellishment. The veridical recording spirit of Sima Qian is especially noted in his capture of modern-day influential people whose descriptions are intricate. As with Emperor Gaozu of Han, Liu Bang, he would first make use of the method of mutual observation to praise his accomplishments in The Annals of Emperor Gaozu and reveal his coldness and distrust in the Annals of Xiang Yu.As scholar Han Zhaoqi observes, this "mutual observation method" enabled him to faithfully record flaws without compromising the subject's overall character [7]. Even more commendable is his criticism of Emperor Wu of Han, evident in the candid commentary within the Treatise on the *Equalisation Fund* and the *Treatise on the Fengshan Sacrifice*. As Luo Biming and Qu Jingyi noted in their 2024 English-language study, textual analysis of the *Biographies of Fan, Li, Teng and Guan* further confirms Sima Qian's adherence to the principle of "neither embellishing virtues nor concealing vices" in his narration, exposing Liu Bang's reneging on promises [8]. This constitutes the highest homage to the tradition of "unconcealed historical record-keeping" established by Dong Hu and the Qi court historians.

4. The Manifestation of Personal Private Discourse

Were it merely a matter of impartiality, the *Shiji* might have been no more than a meticulously documented chronicle. Yet the enduring allure of the Grand Historian's commentary lies precisely in its surging currents of personal conviction. Sima Qian imprinted his entire life experience, philosophical reflections, and value preferences upon his historical judgements.

This "personal commentary" first springs from the anguish of his own life story and emotional resonance. In the *Biography of Bo Yi*, his thunderous challenge to the classical maxim that "Heaven shows no partiality, but always sides with the virtuous" reveals a grief and indignation that is, in truth,

the venting of his own pent-up resentment after suffering injustice. In the *Biographies of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi*, he recounts: "Reading the *Lament*, I... grieved for his aspirations. Travelling to Changsha, I gazed upon the very waters where Qu Yuan drowned himself, and never failed to shed tears." Here, the "shedding tears" and "imagining his character" transcend the detached pen of a historian, becoming a profound dialogue and resonance between two tragic souls across time and space. Scholar Li Changzhi astutely observed that Sima Qian gave form to emotion, his surging sentiments being "a lamentation built upon a solid framework of reason" [9].

Secondly, his "private reflections" manifest as distinct value preferences and the shaping of an idealized persona. Beyond official ideology, Sima Qian wholeheartedly extols those commoners—chivalrous men and assassins—who upheld their convictions and honored their word as if it were worth a thousand pieces of gold. In the *Biographies of the Chivalrous Men*, he laments: "Today's chivalrous men, though their conduct may not align with orthodox justice, are nevertheless men of their word and resolute in their actions...indeed possess commendable qualities." This reverence for popular integrity and rebellious spirit constitutes his distinctive "common people's historical perspective." American sinologist Nicholas H. H. Nye also notes in his research that Sima Qian frequently infused his rigorous textual scholarship with subtle personal value judgements, endowing his narratives with moral tension [10].

From a stylistic perspective, the phrase "Taishi Gong's words" developed specific patterns to amplify subjective expression. Zhang Yutao's 2023 study in the Journal of Huaibei Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition) demonstrated that frequently occurring phrases such as "I have heard," "I have witnessed," and "I deeply lament" constitute distinctive evaluative modes: "personal involvement," "self-perception," and "imaginary conjecture." These narrative models are stylistic breakthroughs shaped by subjective factors, and they deliberately highlight the historian's "self" in historical accounts. They constitute textual techniques enabling the systematic presentation of "private discourse" [2].

5. The Dialectical Unity: Integration and Sublimation of Public Conscience and Private Discourse

5.1. Private Commentary Without Concealing Public Sentiment: The Balance of Emotion and Reason

Even in the most emotionally intense parts of "Tai Shi Gong's Comments", Sima Qian never let go of his rational thinking and commitment to factual basis. Take the *Biography of Bo Yi* as an example: this commentary brims with intense questioning and grief over the injustice of Heaven's ways, representing the pinnacle of "private discourse" expression. Yet his argument is no mere empty lament, but rests upon rigorous historical analysis. He first cites classical texts like the *Book of Songs* and *Book of Documents*, which record that "Heaven shows no partiality, but always sides with the virtuous." He then sharply counters this with the actual fates of numerous historical figures—Bo Yi, Shu Qi, Yan Hui, Dao Zhi, and others—as counterexamples, advancing layer by layer with meticulous logic. Scholar Li Changzhi profoundly analysed that in the *Biography of Boyi*, Sima Qian "gave form to emotion and structure to contemplation." His surging sentiments were "an organized expression," "a lamentation built upon a solid framework of reason." His fervent "private words" not only did not undermine his "public spirit," but rather deepened the intellectual depth of historical narration.

5.2. Public-mindedness Manifested through Personal Commentary: The Individualised Expression of Historical Insight

Conversely, as Zhong Weimin observes, the excellence of the *Shiji* lies in its "full embodiment of the historian's subjectivity", its "rich emotional resonance" and "abundant imaginative power" many of Sima Qian's most profound and incisive historical insights found their most powerful and vivid

expression precisely through his intensely personal "private remarks"[11]. This reveals that the "personal private remarks" within the "Taishi Gong's words" passages are not flaws, but rather a profound historical epistemology and conscious writing practice. Through this deliberate expression of "private remarks," Sima Qian precisely broke through the barriers of traditional empirical historiography, achieving the enduring charm of his work as the "supreme masterpiece of historiography." In the "Taishi Gong's words" section of the *Annals of Xiang Yu*, he assesses Xiang Yu thus: "He prided himself on his military exploits, relying solely on his own cunning without heeding ancient wisdom. Believing the hegemonic enterprise could be achieved through force alone, he sought to conquer and rule the realm. Yet within five years, he lost his kingdom and met his end at Dongcheng. Even then, he failed to awaken to his errors and reproach himself—a grave failing indeed. Instead, he invoked the notion that 'Heaven has abandoned me; it is not the fault of my military strategy'—how utterly mistaken!" This commentary offers both a dispassionate analysis of Xiang Yu's "boasting of his achievements" and "failure to learn from the ancients," while also conveying profound lamentation and criticism through phrases like "still failing to awaken and reproach himself, how mistaken!" and "is this not absurd?" Chen Tongsheng, in his *Commentary on Notable Chapters of the Records of the Grand Historian*, remarked: "This commentary achieves a perfect fusion of emotion and reason. Without emotion, criticism lacks force; without reason, evaluation falters. It is precisely through such 'private words' imbued with human warmth that Sima Qian etched his insights into the rise and fall of dynasties with such incisive precision."[12].

6. Conclusion

This study finds that the "Taishi Gong's words" sections have two main traits. One is the fairness that a historian should have. The other is the author's own opinions. The first trait shows the spirit of keeping historical records. It fills in the missing parts of original materials. It also checks if historical events are true. At the same time, it follows the rule of telling the truth by comparing different sources. The so-called "private commentary" is easy to see in Sima Qian's writing. It includes his thoughts about his own life situation. It has his views on what is valuable—for example, his praise for chivalrous people. It also has his deep thinking about life, like his doubt about how Heaven works. These two aspects are not mutually exclusive but achieve a seamless fusion of rational critique and emotional lamentation in specific commentaries such as the *Biography of Xiang Yu*.

So, the research comes to this conclusion. The core of "The Grand Historian says" is Sima Qian's creative work. He put two things together in a balanced way. One is the objective writing tradition of official historians. The other is the personal thinking of a philosopher. In this way, he achieved his literary goal of "establishing his own school of thought". This combination uses "public-spiritedness" as the base. It makes sure that historical records are true. At the same time, "private commentary" is like the details that give it life. It adds warm feelings to the work. Together, they constitute the core that elevates the *Shiji* beyond mere documentation, rendering it an immortal classic of both historiography and literature.

This research gives useful help to future studies in this area. The main thing is that it provides a detailed analysis model. This model helps people understand two key points. One is the rich meanings of the "veritable record" idea in ancient Chinese historiography. The other is the complicated link between facts and explanations in historical texts. In the past few years, studies on Sima Qian have shown a clear trend. They are combining knowledge from different subjects more and more deeply. Future research can make further use of theories like narratology and the history of emotions. These theories can help do more detailed studies. The studies will focus on the narrative methods used in the "Taishi Gong's words" sections. They will also look at how these methods affect the emotional parts of later literary and historical works. Concurrently, applying this "public-mindedness versus private expression" analytical framework to the "Commentaries" section of the *Book of Han*, and indeed to comparative studies of more classical works of Chinese and Western historiography, would constitute a valuable academic extension.

References

[1] Hao J., Hao J. A review of Sima Qian studies since 2020. Journal of Weinan Normal University, 2024, 39 (09): 52 – 62.

[2] Zhang Y. Explanation of the textual patterns and variants of “Taishigong’s words” in Records of the Grand Historian. Journal of Huaibei Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 2023, 44 (04): 87 – 93.

[3] Shen X. A new exploration of the original meaning of “veritable records”. Monthly Journal of History, 2023, (07): 5 – 14.

[4] Nie S., Li B., Yuan X., eds. History of Chinese Literature. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 1999.

[5] Zhang D. Research on Shiji documents. Beijing: Nationalities Publishing House, 1999.

[6] Zhao S. Miscellaneous essays on Shiji documentation studies. Nanjing: Jiangsu Ancient Books Publishing House, 2000.

[7] Han Z. Commentary on the Records of the Grand Historian. Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House, 2012.

[8] Luo B., Qu J. A textual analysis of biographies of Fan, Li, Teng and Guan in The Historical Records. The Journal of Xinyang Normal University, 2024, 44 (01): 1 – 4, 10.

[9] Li C. The character and style of Sima Qian. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2013.

[10] Nienhauser W. H. Jr. The river of history: A collection of studies on Shiji. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2023.

[11] Zhong W. Why is only Shiji hailed as the “masterpiece of historiography”? Reading, 2025, (07): 41 – 48.

[12] Chen T. Essays on notable chapters from the Records of the Grand Historian. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2016.