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Views from Within, Views from Beyond:
Approaches to the *Shiji* as an Early Work of Historiography

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Inheritor of a Subversive Mind? Approaching Yang Yun from his Letter to Sun Huizong

Dorothee Schaab-Hanke

Chapter 41 of the *Wenxuan* 文選, the earliest anthology of Chinese literature arranged by genre, in its section entitled “shu” 書 (letters) contains, amongst others, three famous texts in direct succession. The first is the letter that the Han general Li Ling 李陵 (?–74 BCE) is said to have written to his friend, the diplomat Su Wu 蘇武 (ca. 140–60 BCE); the second is the letter that the historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 86 BCE) is said to have written to his friend Ren An; and the third is the letter that Yang Yun 楊惲 (?–54), Sima Qian’s maternal grandson, is said to have written to his friend or colleague Sun Huizong 孫會宗.¹

Since Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531), the compiler of the *Wenxuan*, certainly made a careful choice among the sample texts he selected for his anthology, we may assume that the fact that these three letters (and only these three) are selected and put together here probably is meaningful. While Xiao Tong has not left any comments about his choice, he almost certainly had those of Liu Xie 劉勰 (c. 465–522) in his mind who in his work of early Chinese literary theory, the *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, in its section “Shuji” 書記 (letters and records) mentions both Sima Qian’s letter to Ren An and Yang Yun’s letter to Sun Huizong.² He writes:

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- 1 See *Wenxuan* 41.1881–1891 (“Da Su Wu shu” 答蘇武書); *Wenxuan* 41.1891–1908 („Bao Ren shaoqing shu” 報任少卿書); *Wenxuan* 41.1908–1914 (“Bao Sun Huizong shu” 報孫會宗書). The authenticity of all three letters has been called into question by some. For a long study on the letter to Su Wu attributed to Li Ling see K.P.K. Whitaker (1953). On the basis of a comparison of style he came to the result that the letter was in reality written by Jiang Yan 江淹 (444–505). I owe this hint to Esther Sunkyung Klein, whom I would also like to thank for all her valuable corrections and suggestions. I will deal with the question with regard to the other two letters under discussion here briefly below, but for the sake of simplicity in what follows the letters will be referred to merely as “Sima Qian’s letter to Ren An” and “Yang Yun’s letter to Sun Huizong”.
 - 2 I am obliged to Olga Lomova who has directed my attention to Antje Richter’s study on Section 25 of the *Wenxin diaolong*. Richter’s proposal to render “Shuji” with “written records” (see Richter 2007, 148) is certainly worth considering, but in my view replaces the problem of a consistent translation for all kinds of written documents subsumed under this category by a new problem, namely that “written records” is no valid counterpart for the other genres found in the work, thus I prefer to retain *shu* 書 and *ji* 記 as separate categories, as suggested by David R. Knechtges in his comparison of the genres contained in the *Wenxuan* and the *Wenxin diaolong* (see Knechtges 1982, Intro, esp. 23).

觀史遷之報任安，楊惲之酬會宗 [...]，志氣槃桓，各含殊采；並杼軸乎尺素，抑揚乎寸心。

Regarding (the letter) that Scribe Qian wrote as a response to Ren An [...] and the one that Yang Yun addressed to Huizong [...]: Their aspirations and thrust were exalted. While every one (of these letters) has its particular hue, it is true for all of them that what is woven into a foot of silk³ is the distress or the delight of an inch of heart.⁴

The central aspect of this passage, which has been rendered quite differently in translation, is in my view the emotional element and the personal tone, from one heart to another heart, which is characteristic for texts of the genre *shu*. From such an emphasis on the personal element of letters it may be suggested that both Sima Qian's letter to Ren An and Yang Yun's letter to Sun Huizong in some way may be called representative or even outstanding in the way they conveyed "the distress or the delight of an inch of heart" to another "inch of heart", namely the recipient of such a letter.⁵

Indeed, a closer reading of all three texts reveals that they all display their authors in a highly emotional situation. The Han general Li Ling in his letter vehemently tries to persuade Su Wu to surrender to the Xiongnu, too. Sima Qian in his letter justifies his decision not to speak out to the emperor on behalf of his friend Ren An by trying to explain that his advocacy would not be of any help to him. And Yang Yun in his letter to Sun Huizong rejects Sun Huizong's admonition regarding how he should behave in order to have a chance to be called back to the court.

But apart from the fact that all these letters are characterized by this highly emotional tone, there is also a personal connection between the authors of the three letters: Li Ling was a general who served Emperor Wu of the Han (r. 141–87) and who had fallen into disgrace because he had decided to surrender to the Xiongnu in order to save the lives of his soldiers. The court astrologer and historian Sima Qian had suffered the bitter penalty of castration because he had dared to take sides with Li Ling. And Yang Yun, the son of Sima Qian's daughter and the chancellor Yang Chang, was Sima Qian's grandson whose

3 According to Antje Richter, the term "a foot of silk" became a synonym for "letter" in early medieval China. See Richter 2007, 153, n. 72. However, relating to the letters treated in this passage, if Liu Xie indeed meant to use this synonym it must have been an anachronism with regard to the letters treated here, since they were certainly not written on silk.

4 *Wenxin diaolong* 25.456. This passage has been rendered quite differently by Vincent Yu-chung Shih (1983, 145ff), Wong Siu-kit (1999, 95), and Yang Guobin (2003), and in my rendering here I decided to follow primarily Richter 2007, 153. However, the phrase *yi yang hu cun xin* 抑揚乎寸心 (rendered in the above passage as "the distress or the delight of an inch of heart") in my view does not refer, as Richter suggests, to the "intellectually and emotionally perceptive mind of the reader", but to the constitution of the writer's heart. Considering the fact that letters are a very personal form of communication between two persons and thus two hearts, the result is, however, ultimately the same.

5 As David R. Knechtges puts it, the letters in the *Wenxuan* are characterized by "a wide range of personal sentiments". See Knechtges 1982, Intro, 43.

mother was Sima Qian's daughter. As is widely known, it was in the Yang home that one copy of the *Shiji* was preserved. Yang Yun, who himself is said to have taken a keen interest in historiography, was able to make the work for the first time known to a larger public.⁶

By deciding to arrange these three letters in direct succession, Xiao Tong might also have taken into consideration the fact that Yang Yun as Sima Qian's grandson was not only familiar with his grandfather's letter to Ren An but that he referred to it also in his own. As I will try to demonstrate in this paper, Yang Yun in his letter to Sun Huizong displayed an attitude which was not only quite unusual for the time in which he lived but also bears striking similarity with ideas expressed both in Sima Qian's letter to Ren An and also in the *Shiji*, and I will argue that Yang Yun not only must have had his grandfather's letter to Ren An in mind when he wrote his letter to Sun Huizong but also that he adopted values that are represented both in his grandfather's letter and in several passages of his ancestor's work, the *Shiji*.⁷

In a first step, I will examine the content of Yang Yun's letter to Sun Huizong and the closer context in which the letter was written. My primary interest will be the new identity of Yang Yun as a farmer and merchant, after he had been dismissed from court and had to make a living for himself and his family outside the court. In a second step, the letter that Sima Qian wrote to Ren An will be examined with a special focus on the question of what court life meant to Sima Qian. Thirdly, a closer look at the *Shiji* will be taken to see how commoners who worked as farmers and merchants were treated and evaluated by the historian. Then, I will adduce some material which shows how the *Shiji*'s account of farmers and merchants was received by later intellectuals. And it will be asked if the two letters may justly be taken as two documents of a "subversive" mind or if such a conclusion has again been suggested to the reader through some manipulation of the transmitted material.

1 Taking a Closer Look at Yang Yun's Letter to Sun Huizong

Before a closer look will be taken at the letter itself, some important information on Yang Yun which is provided in his biography in the *Hanshu* will be summarized below.⁸

According to this biography, Yang Yun was first nominated as a "Gentleman-attendant" (*lang* 郎) at the court of Emperor Xuan (r. 74–49). Since he was informed early about a plot against the ruling emperor by Huo Yu, the plot was foiled. Yang Yun was one of five men who were enfeoffed with a nobility for their merit, and he was promoted to become "Leader of Court Gentlemen" (*zhonglang jiang* 中郎將). The way he behaved in his new position is

6 This information is found in Sima Qian's biography in *Hanshu* 61.2737.

7 The third letter, written by Li Ling to Su Wu, will not be examined in this paper.

8 For a comprehensive account of Yang Yun's life based on his biography in the *Hanshu*, see Kroll 2010. I am much obliged to Michael Nylan who has directed my attention to the existence of this article.

depicted quite ambiguously. On the one hand he was a righteous, even somewhat pedantic official; on the other hand he was generous and distributed the money he had inherited from his father among members of his family. Due to a certain tendency towards disclosing other people's secrets, as his biographer knew, Yang Yun's relations with other court officials were not exclusively friendly. This apparently caused his colleague Dai Changle to accuse him of having made derogatory remarks about the emperor and thus of having committed high treason. The accusation led to an investigation, with the result that both Yang Yun and Dai Changle were dismissed and made commoners. Yang Yun then decided to live a life as farmer and merchant. In this situation his friend Sun Huizong sent him a letter in which he admonished him to behave more modestly. By doing so, he hoped, Yang Yun might get another chance to make a career as court official. Yang Yun's letter then was the response to this admonition. – It might be important to add here that, according to the *Hanshu* report, after having read Yang Yun's letter, Emperor Xuan got angry. The former accusation that Yang Yun had acted with gross immorality against the throne was taken up again, and Yang Yun was in consequence condemned to death by execution at the waist.

In the present context, three aspects of Yang Yun's letter to Sun Huizong seem to deserve special attention. They may be briefly summarized as: (1) Yang Yun's rejection of his friend's admonition, (2) his feeling of having suffered disgrace, and (3) his defensive attempt to justify his decision not to return to the court as an official even against the advice of his friend. All three aspects will be more closely examined below.

As for the context in which Yang Yun's response to Sun Huizong should be seen, the historian Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) informs his readers:

惲既失爵位，家居治產業，起室宅，以財自娛。歲餘，其友人安定太守西河孫會宗，知略士也，與惲書諫戒之，為言大臣廢退，當闔門惶懼，為可憐之意，不當治產業，通賓客，有稱譽。

After Yang Yun had lost his nobility, he lived at home and engaged himself privately in the business of cultivating the land; he erected a house and used his assets to enjoy himself. A year or so later, his friend, the Governor of Anding, Sun Huizong of Xihe, a man of wisdom and strategies, wrote a letter to Yun in order to admonish him, telling him that when a high dignitary was dismissed from office, the appropriate demeanor would be to lock his door and take on a frightened manner, he should not engage in a private business, and in his contacts with clients and guests he should strive for acquiring a good reputation.⁹

In his response, Yang Yun vehemently rejects his friend's advice, arguing that while his friend was still regarding him as a member of the group of the high dignitaries (*dachen* 大臣), he himself, once he had been dismissed from court, felt that his life had changed so drastically that he instead belonged to the commoner class, with the consequence that

⁹ *Hanshu* 66.2894. The passages from Yang Yun's biography in *Hanshu* rendered here are my own translation.

the norms that had been valid for him as long as he was an official were not the same once he had become a farmer and merchant. In other words, he had changed his social identity. In Yang Yun's own words:

憚幸有餘祿，方糴賤販貴，逐什一之利，此賈豎之事，汙辱之處，憚親行之。下流之人，眾毀所歸，不寒而栗。雖雅知憚者，猶隨風而靡，尚何稱譽之有！董生不云乎？「明明求仁義，常恐不能化民者，卿大夫意也；明明求財利，常恐困乏者，庶人之事也。」故「道不同，不相為謀。」今子尚安得以卿大夫之制而責僕哉！

I, Yun, had the luck of being in the possession of some surplus assets, and I made use of this to buy grain when the price was low and to sell it when the prize was high. This is a matter that merchants and other mean people are engaged in, a shameful enterprise, and such is what I, Yun, are personally involved in. Having become a member of the lowest class in society, being deprived of all I had belonged to earlier, I tremble even though it is not cold. Even those who used to be intimate friends of mine before, have disappeared as quickly as the wind – what kind of reputation could I still enjoy? Wasn't it Master Dong who once said something like: "To strive with all one's might for benevolence and righteousness, always afraid one might not be able to improve the morals of the people – this is the ambition of a statesman. To strive with all one's might for goods and profit, always afraid one might become poor and miserable – this is the business of ordinary people."¹⁰ So, it has been said, "those who do not follow the same road cannot make plans for each other".¹¹ Why, then, do you come with the ideals of the statesman and use them to censure a person like me?¹²

By quoting the Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (197–104. B.C.) who clearly distinguishes between what high dignitaries (*qing daifu* 卿大夫) and commoners (*shuren* 庶人) should strive for, Yang Yun's argument attains a rather cynical tone. In general, a commoner would certainly not be able to quote such a prominent and acknowledged Confucian scholar in his justification of why he preferred not to be reckoned among the court officials anymore but to be free to engage in any business he wished to. On the other hand, the

10 While the search for these words in the *Chunqiu fanlu* text that has been ascribed to Dong Zhongshu only leads to rather vague passages with similar statements (e.g.: ICS 11–49.39, admonishing the ruler to give weight to humanity and modesty and to neglect the search for profit), Dong Zhongshu's biography in the *Hanshu* has an almost word for word parallel with this passage. See *Hanshu* 56.2521: 夫皇皇求財利常恐乏匱者，庶人之意也；皇皇求仁義常恐不能化民者，大夫之意也。I thank Hans van Ess for bringing this quote to my attention.

11 This is quoted as a saying by Confucius in *Lunyu* 15.39. The saying is also quoted in *Shiji* 61.2126, and 63.2143.

12 *Hanshu* 66.2896. For a full translation of the letter to Sun Huizong, cf. Watson (1962), 116–119. Watson's translation of the letter has been examined critically by Kroll (2010, 314, n. 50). In his view, Watson's renderings are at times more a literary "re-telling" than a word-for-word translation. For the purposes of this study, however, I will adopt most of Watson's renderings and merely change some terms and passages which seem to me of special relevance for the arguments raised here.

fact that Yang Yun still perceived his new life to be “shameful” is expressed in the words “though the weather is not cold, I shiver to think of this humiliating disgrace”. Disgrace is a recurring topic in the letter, one that is again taken up in his lament over what had happened to him when he still was a court official and in a highly honoured position. He says:

憚家方隆盛時，乘朱輪者十人，位在列卿，爵為通侯，總領從官，與聞政事，曾不能以此時有所建明，以宣德化，又不能與群僚同心并力，陪輔朝廷之遺忘，已負竊位素餐之責久矣。懷祿貪勢，不能自退，遭遇變故，橫被口語，身幽北闕，妻子滿獄。When my family was at the height of its power, ten of us rode about in the vermilion-wheeled carriages of high officials.¹³ I held a place in the ranks of ministers and was enfeoffed as a marquis. I had charge of the officials who waited upon the emperor and I took part in the handling of affairs of state. And yet at that time I was unable to contribute anything to the advancement and glorification of imperial rule, nor did I succeed in joining my efforts with those of my fellow officials in repairing defects and oversights in the government. For a long time I was guilty rather of stealing a post I did not deserve and enjoying a salary I had not earned, coveting my stipend, greedy for power, and quite unable to check myself. Then I met with a sudden change of fortune and found myself faced with unbridled accusations. I was confined to the North Tower of the Palace and my wife and children were thrown into prison.¹⁴

From his words, it seems as if Yang Yun considered himself to be – at least partly – responsible for what had happened to him. Looking back on his life at the imperial court, he is convinced that he was not worthy of the income he had earned at that time. But however justified he may have judged his downfall in retrospect, it must have come wholly unexpectedly to him. Thus, whatever the true reasons may have been that led to his decision not to strive for an office at the imperial court any more, the fact that he proved able to earn his livelihood is described quite positively in his letter:

君子游道，樂以忘憂；小人全軀，說以忘罪。竊自思念，過已大矣，行已虧矣，長為農夫以沒世矣。是故身率妻子，戮力耕桑，灌園治產，以給公上，不意當復用此為譏議也。

The superior man practices the Way and delights in forgetting his cares. The mean man seeks to prolong his life and loves to forget his faults. Considering that my errors had been great and my actions far from what they should have been, I decided that it was best for me to end my days as a farmer. So I took my wife and family to the country where, pooling our strength, we plow, tend the mulberries, water the garden, and so produce enough to pay our taxes to the state. I can hardly believe that I am now also being reprimanded for this!¹⁵

13 These were the carriages of high dignitaries.

14 *Hanshu* 66.2895.

15 *Hanshu* 66.2895.

The last sentence of the letter repeats Yang Yun's rejection of Sun Huizong's advice which apparently contains nothing he can appreciate but instead seems just to annoy him. As Yang Yun points out quite clearly in his letter, whatever brought his new life about, now that he had struggled to build for himself and his family a new existence, he will not change his mind and turn back to his former life at court. In spite of the low status of the social group he now belongs to, Yang Yun expresses considerable self-confidence, even pride about his new life. But in a society in which the esteem of farmers and merchants was as low as it must have been during Yang Yun's lifetimes, where could he possibly have drawn this kind of pride and self-confidence from? As I will argue in this paper, Yang Yun who was, as we know, quite familiar with his ancestors' work, must have shared some basic values with his grandfather and grand-grandfather. Perhaps he was already educated to think in these categories from childhood on, or he was imbued with these thoughts only later in life when he started to read his ancestors' work. It seems that Yang Yun, both by some central decisions he took in his life and also by the way he argues in his letter, adopted some of his ancestors' thinking and applied them on his own life. In what follows, I will try to show both from passages in his grandfather Sima Qian's letter to Ren An and from Chapter 129 of the *Shiji*, the chapter about merchants and the art of money making, how well Yang Yun's attitude as it is expressed in his letter to Sun Huizong fits with statements and judgements found in that chapter.

2 Some Aspects of Sima Qian's Letter to Ren An in Comparison with Yang Yun's Letter to Sun Huizong

Although the two letters that will be compared were written in quite different temporal contexts and both deal with different topics, there still seem to be some aspects in which they are quite similar to each other. Thus, for the sake of easier comparability, precisely those aspects that I have scrutinized with regard to Yang Yun's letter to Sun Huizong will also be considered in Sima Qian's letter to Ren An, i.e. (1) the rejection of a friend's admonition, (2) the feeling of having suffered disgrace, and (3) the aspect of self-defense or justification of why he did what he did.¹⁶

As for the first aspect, the events that preceded Sima Qian's letter were that Ren An had been accused of some offence, and believing that Sima Qian was a highly regarded official at the court of Emperor Wu, Ren An hoped that this friend would speak on his behalf to the emperor. In his letter, Sima Qian sets out to explain to Ren An that even if Sima Qian did speak out in favor of Ren An, this would only add to Ren An's problems, given that

16 For a more detailed analysis on Sima Qian's letter to Ren An as part of the biographical account that Ban Gu had devoted to him in the *Hanshu*, see Schaab-Hanke 2006a, rev. 2010.

Sima Qian himself was in such low esteem after all that had happened.¹⁷ This is how Sima Qian's letter begins:

曩者辱賜書，教以慎於接物，推賢進士為務，意氣勤勤懇懇，若望僕不相師用，而流俗人之言。僕非敢如是也。雖罷駑，亦嘗側聞長者遺風矣。顧自以為身殘處穢，動而見尤，欲益反損，是以抑鬱而無誰語。

In the past I, the one who is in disgrace, have received a letter from you; in it you instruct me that I should be cautious in my relationship with other people, and that I had the duty to recommend gentlemen to the court. Your concern is indeed kind and heartfelt. You will probably be inclined to think that I am not willing to pay heed to your advice and instead I am following the counsels of vulgar people. No, I assure you this is indeed something that I would certainly not do. Even though I am a decrepit old horse, I have nevertheless heard about the teachings handed down from antiquity. But considering myself being no more than a mutilated being who dwells in degradation, any action I would undertake would only make things worse; any benefit I might like to bring others would only, on the contrary, result in doing them injury. This is why I am in sadness and despair with no one to speak to.¹⁸

Sima Qian thus justifies his refusal to speak out on behalf of his friend to the Emperor with the argument that due to the punishment by castration he underwent he would not be a good spokesman for him. While his friend reminds him of the obligation of a worthy man to recommend other worthy persons to the court he expresses very clearly that after all that had happened to him he was only “a mutilated being who dwells in degradation”, who would not be of any use for him. Even more clearly, Sima Qian writes, close to the end of his letter:

今少卿乃教以推賢進士，無乃與僕之私指謬乎。今雖欲自彫琢，曼辭以自解，無益，於俗不信，祇取辱耳。

Now you, Shaoqing [i.e., Ren An], have advised me to recommend worthy men and to promote gentlemen, but would not such an activity run contrary to my own interests? Now although I should try to add glory and fame to myself, or with fine words seek to excuse my error, would this be of no avail, because I would not be believed by the vulgar people, and instead only take upon myself further shame.¹⁹

In other words, Sima Qian's fears that to speak on behalf on his friend would not only be of no avail for his friend, but would merely lead to an even more disgraceful situation for himself.

17 The letter is also quoted in Sima Qian's biography in *Hanshu* 62.2725–2736. For a full translation of the letter, see Watson (1958), 57–67. Also with regard to this letter, I will adopt most of Watson's renderings and merely change some terms and passages which seem to me of special relevance for the arguments raised here.

18 *Hanshu* 62.2725.

19 *Hanshu* 62.2736.

As for the second aspect to consider here, the topic of shame figures prominently in Sima Qian's letter to Ren An. It occurs several times and with different terms, denoting both the disgrace brought upon himself and the disgrace that he, by his miserable fate, has brought upon his ancestors.²⁰ As for the latter aspect, this is how Sima Qian expresses the kind of disgrace that seems to be the most violating of all to him:

且負下未易居，下流多謗議。僕以口語遇遭此禍，重為鄉黨戮笑，汗辱先人，亦何面目復上父母之丘墓乎？雖累百世，垢彌甚耳！是以腸一日而九回，居則忽忽若有所亡，出則不知所如往。每念斯恥，汗未嘗不發背露衣也。

It is not easy to dwell in poverty and lowliness while base men multiply their slanderous counsels. I met this misfortune because of the words I spoke. I have brought upon myself the scorn and mockery even of my native village and I have soiled and shamed my ancestors's name. With what face can I again ascend and stand before the grave mound of my father and mother? Though a hundred generations pass, my defilement will only become greater. This is the thought that wrenches my bowels nine times each day. Sitting at home, I am befuddled as though I had lost something. I go out, and then realize that I do not know where I am going. Each time I think of this shame, the sweat pours from my back and soaks my robe.²¹

However, if one reads the letter to Ren An closely, one finds that it is precisely the aspect of his fear of being humiliated even with regard to his ancestors to which he finds, in the course of his letter, a somewhat comforting perspective. This perspective is that his decision not to commit suicide, as the norms of society might have urged him to do, would be justified by posterity if he managed to bring to an end what his father had begun, namely his opus magnum, the *Shiji*. In Sima Qian's words,

僕雖怯粟欲苟活，亦頗識去就之分矣，何至自湛溺累繼之辱哉！且夫臧獲婢妾猶能引決，況若僕之不得已乎！所以隱忍苟活，函糞土之中而不辭者，恨私心有所不盡，鄙沒世而文采不表於後也。

Though I might be weak and cowardly and seek shamelessly to prolong my life, yet I know full well the difference between what ought to be followed and what rejected. How could I bring myself to sink into the shame of ropes and bonds? If even the lowest slave and scullion maid can bear to commit suicide, why should not one like myself be able to do what has to be done? But the reason I have not refused to bear these ills and have continued to live,

20 To give only some examples, the following terms for shame are used in the letter to Ren An: *chi* 恥, *qu ru* 取辱, "to take shame upon oneself", *ru xian* 辱先, "to bring shame to one's ancestors" (*Hanshu* 62.2736), and *gou* 詬, in the context of "gou mo da yu gongxing" 詬莫大於宮刑 ("no disgrace is greater than the palace punishment"). See *Hanshu* 62.2727.

21 *Hanshu* 62.2736.

dwelling in vileness and disgrace without taking my leave, is that I grieve that I have things in my heart which I have not been able to express fully, and I am shamed to think that after I am gone my writings will not be known to posterity.²²

Thus, the aspect of shame and that of self-defense and self-justification are closely related to each other in Sima Qian's letter, and it seems that there is a slight hope of reconciliation, something of which he hopes that either his friend Ren An or someone else who might read this letter in the future would be able to understand.

In sum, Sima Qian's overall attitude, if we may draw this conclusion from the letter, is that of a deeply frustrated court official who precisely because he had fallen into disgrace after he had attempted to speak in favour of a friend or colleague, Li Ling, he now refuses to take sides with Ren An, out of fear of again running into difficulties. At the same time, he seems to despise himself for his attitude, and for his decision to stay at the court and to live in under such humiliating circumstances. The only reason why he did not commit suicide, we learn from his letter, was that Sima Qian felt he still had a mission, namely to bring the grand historiographical enterprise to an end, and that it would have been an even greater shame for him (and also for his ancestors) if this project did not get a chance to be made known to posterity.

If one compares the letter that Yang Yun had sent to Sun Huizong with that of Sima Qian addressed to Ren An we find some striking similarities. One is the above mentioned inner structure which I have proposed to summarize as the three aspects of "rejection of the friend's admonition", "the feeling of suffered disgrace" and "self-defense". While the details are quite different in each case, all three letters are characterized by a very touching confession of someone whose heart is in utmost distress – perhaps this is exactly what Liu Xie had meant by writing that what the three first documents listed in the *Wenxuan* under "letters" (*shu*) have in common is that they express "the distress or the delight of an inch of heart".

While the lives that Sima Qian and his grandson Yang Yun describe in their letters differ greatly from each other – Sima Qian even after having suffered the extreme penalty continued to live and work at the Imperial court, Yang Yun after his dismissal chose to live as a farmer and merchant – closer reading of Sima Qian's letter suggests that he hated his situation and would have wished nothing more than to leave the court, had he only enough financial means to do so. Yang Yun, on the other hand, had inherited a good sum of money from his deceased father and indeed decided to leave the court and engage in a business of his own. To both, it seems, a life away from court was desirable, and even though Sima Qian does not mention farmers or merchants in his letter, elsewhere in his work he makes quite clear that his attitude towards these people was quite unorthodox. It is thus perhaps not too farfetched to ask if Yang Yun in his decision-making and almost pride about his new life was in some way or other influenced by his grandfather's – and probably also – grand-grandfather's value system.

22 *Hanshu* 62.2733.

3 Reconsidering the *Shiji*'s Attitude towards Farmers and Merchants

To formulate a bit more precisely what has been said at the outset of this essay, it will be argued here that Yang Yun in his letter to Sun Huizong demonstrated a self-confident attitude in his new identity as a farmer and merchant which was quite unusual for the time in which he lived and which bears striking similarities to ideas expressed both in Sima Qian's letter to Ren An and also in the *Shiji*. Of course, the chapter from which we may expect the most information on the historian's attitude towards farmers and merchants is its Chapter 129, the "Arranged Biographies of People who Accumulated Wealth" (*Huozhi liezhuan* 貨殖列傳). This chapter is probably one of the most discussed chapters of the *Shiji*, all the more because it is one of those chapters which have been directly criticized in the early historiographical reception. Thanks to the fact that two other highly illuminating papers of this volume are centered on this chapter,²³ I will mainly refer to their results here and only add some more aspects that seem to me of special interest for the topic under discussion.

It is remarkable that the chapter opens with a reference to *Laozi* 80. The quotation evokes the picture of a country where the people have no desires as regards what they eat and drink and where people do not travel from one place to the other even though they are direct neighbors. This is an ideal to which the historian objects with the argument that if a ruler tried to put such advice into practice, he would "block the eyes and ears of the people" (*wan jinshi tumin ermu* 輓近世涂民耳目), ergo such an idea would not work any more in the era in which the historian wrote. This is, of course, a perfect opening for a chapter the central part of which is devoted to the benefits that come from commoners who strive for accumulating money and engage in farming, trading or other occupations, because it clearly takes sides for the necessity that men of their kind also are an important part of a developing society.²⁴

But the historian not only assigns to the merchants and others who satisfy all kinds of needs and desires of people their appropriate place in society. He even proceeds to argue that commoners who managed to accumulate money not only attained a better social status but also could justly be called virtuous depending on how they used the money they had earned. In his own words:

若至家貧親老，妻子軟弱，歲時無以祭祀進饌，飲食被服不足以自通，如此不慚恥，則無所比矣。是以無財作力，少有鬥智既饒爭時，此其大經也。今治生不待危身取給，則賢人勉焉。是故本富為上，末富次之，姦富最下。無巖處奇士之行，而長貧賤，好語仁義，亦足羞也。

As for those who because their families are poor and whose parents are old and because their wives and children are feeble and young do not have the means to perform the obligatory season's sacrifices or to arrange feasts, or who have not

23 See the papers by Michael Nylan and Beatrice l'Haridon in this volume.

24 The way the historian refers to *Laozi* 80 in the opening section of this chapter has also been discussed by Nylan (139) and l'Haridon (169) in this. Remarkably, *Fayan* 11.17 (which will be quoted below) also refers to that *Laozi* passage, arguing contrarily in favour of the ideal of the "small country".

even enough food and clothing to make a living, if they feel not deeply ashamed of such a situation, then what else would make them? Therefore, those who have no assets at all, should invest all their energy to work; those who have only few (assets), should use their wits and strive for more; and those who are already well off should grasp the right point in time to make a profit, this should be one's general guideline. Nowadays, what a worthy should urgently do is to make a living and not wait until one gets into dire straits. Therefore: The best wealth is that achieved through primary occupations; the next best is wealth that is achieved through secondary occupations, and the worst of all is wealth that is achieved through vile occupations.²⁵ But if someone who does not lead the life of a recluse from among the cliffs or that of anotherwise outstanding gentleman but who is simply permanently short of money is still fond of talking about humanity and justice, then he ought to be thoroughly ashamed of himself.²⁶

Several aspects are remarkable in this passage. One of them is the hierarchy Sima Qian builds here, saying that among the ways commoners earn their living, that of farmers comes first, that of merchants second, and so on. Whatever the sources were on which this hierarchy on primary and secondary occupations was based, it demonstrates well that Sima Qian did not share the attitude of many of those reckoning themselves among the "Confucian" scholars of his lifetime, according to which people engaged in trade were among the most despicable people of the society. Quite obviously, Sima Qian felt sympathy or even admiration for people who worked hard to earn their living.

And what is more, what he actually says at the beginning of this passage is that to be able to make money is depicted as something a virtuous man should indeed strive for. And since one needs money for manifold activities in society (to be able to hold an appropriate funeral for one's parents, for example), he even claims that the earning of money is part of the obligations that a pious son has towards his parents. The historian even goes so far as to claim that someone who does not care for earning money should be ashamed to talk about humanity and morality. This, of course, runs wholly counter to the conviction of any true Confucian scholar of his time, who would argue that even someone who has no money at all is able to fulfill all his obligations as pious child.²⁷ We may thus cautiously conclude

25 One sees here a hierarchy of three types of wealth – *benfu* 本富 (literally: wealth achieved through primary occupations), which refers to agriculture, *mofu* 末富 (literally: wealth achieved through secondary occupations), which points to the activities of merchants, and *jianfu* 姦富 (literally: wealth achieved through vile occupations", which addresses making money through criminal acts). Such a hierarchy does not seem to be enumerated anywhere prior to the *Shiji*. In the *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 (Discourses on Salt and Iron), a text which is believed by Michael Loewe to have been written down around 70 BCE, the notion of primary and secondary occupations (*ben* 本, *mo* 末) plays an important role, see e.g., the section "Benyi" 本議 (ICS: 1.1/1/10), where the proposal to foster agriculture and to curb trade is put forward in the debate held between what Michael Loewe has called the "Reformists" and the "Modernists" on the question whether the exploitation of the empire's economical resources should be expanded or rather retrenched. See Loewe 1974, esp. 72f.

26 *Shiji* 129.3272. Cf. the – albeit a bit vague – rendering by Yang & Yang, 423f.

27 The historian's emphasis on wealth as a precondition of ritual activity, especially with regard to a pious

that our historian had a highly individual outlooks on life – no wonder that such an attitude raised severe criticism among his contemporaries.²⁸

Among the several persons whose lives are briefly sketched in Chap. 129 of the *Shiji*, certainly the most prominent one is Fan Li 范蠡 (5th century BCE). The story of his life before he decided to become a merchant is told in still another chapter of the *Shiji*, in the “Hereditary House of the State of Yue”, where he is depicted as an advisor of the King of Yue. Fan Li became highly reknown throughout the state of Yue, but declined when the king offered him to govern the state and preferred to leave Yue when his prestige was at its peak.²⁹ He retired and went to Tao, where he became a merchant and managed to accumulate a large fortune. Here is what *Shiji* 129 has to say about him:

范蠡既雪會稽之恥，[...]，之陶為朱公。朱公以為陶天下之中，諸侯四通，貨物所交易也。乃治產積居。與時逐而不責於人。故善治生者，能擇人而任時。十九年之中三致千金，再分散與貧交疏昆弟。此所謂富好行其德者也。

After the disgrace of Kuaiji was wiped out, Fan Li [...] went to Tao where he became Lord Zhu. Lord Zhu was of the opinion that Tao was positioned at the navel of the world, because it was a place where all the feudal lords met and it was a center for the exchange of goods. Upon this, he accumulated wealth by being engaged in a business. He followed the seasonal rhythms (of trade) without giving account to other people. In this way he became a good manager, one who knew how to select people and when. Three times in nineteen years he accumulated a thousand pieces of gold, and twice divided these among distant relatives and those in want. He was, in fact, what one might call someone who was rich and yet loved to exercise his own kind of virtue.³⁰

Fan Li is thus depicted as a man who in his life attained high honours but decided to retire and who accumulated assets but distributed them generously among distant relatives and poor people. What the historian does by choosing Fan Li as an example of “someone who was rich and yet loved to exercise his own kind of virtue” is that he evaluates someone who from the business he is engaged in would be reckoned among the most despised people in society as one who also may be called virtuous. In the Confucian worldview the merchants’ striving for profit (*qiu li* 求利) was precisely the opposite of what a *junzi* 君子, a true noble, would be allowed to do. To strive for humanity and morality (*qiu renyi* 求仁義) was the duty and thus a characteristic virtue of a *junzi*. But in its assessment of Fan Li the *Shiji* text brings two aspects together that would seem irreconcilable for any good Confucian, namely

man’s obligations towards his parents has also been mentioned by both Nylan (140–144) and L’Haridon (175–176) in this volume.

28 As Michael Nylan (136) in this volume puts it so aptly, “Sima Qian admired ingenuity”.

29 See *Shiji* 41.1744ff.

30 *Shiji* 129.3257; cf. tr. Yang & Yang, 413f. Last sentence changed. Yang & Yang, 414, translate: “He was, in fact, a rich anthropologist”. According to Nylan, n. 99, the historian praises him here as “a rich man who likes implementing his virtue”; l’Haridon proposes: “This is what is meant by a rich man who delights in practising virtue.”

that a rich man would not only strive for accumulating more wealth but also for practising virtue.³¹ And the impression that there is a tendency in the *Shiji* towards praising the merchants and their activities as something which is not only a necessary part of social life but even of a certain benefit for it, is even enhanced if one takes also the rhymed preface relating to Chapter 129 into consideration.³² There we read:

布衣匹夫之人，不害於政，不妨百姓，取與以時而息財富，智者有采焉。作貨殖列傳第六十九。

Commoners and ordinary people do no harm to the government and do not oppress the Hundred Families, but make use of the right circumstances to produce wealth. From them the sage may well learn something; this is why I compiled the “Biographies of Those who Accumulated Wealth”.³³

To conclude from the above said, Chap. 129 of the *Shiji* in various respects offers a quite positive picture of rich commoners and their art of money making. This holds especially true for the case of Fan Li, the synonym for a wealthy man in early China, of whom the historian says that he loved to practice his own kind of virtue. Thus, if Yang Yun who was not only rich but after his dismissal from court comprised both what has been called the primary occupation of a farmer and the secondary occupation of a merchant, and who was certainly well familiar with this chapter of the *Shiji*, may well have based his self-confidence as regarding his new identity on the values propagated in his ancestors’ work.

4 The *Shiji*’s Treatment of Merchants as the Cause of Criticism in its Early Reception

Precisely because Yang Yun, in his new life as a farmer and merchant, seems to have adopted values that had been formulated in a rather innovative way in his ancestor’s work, the *Shiji*, it is of special interest how much of the sharp criticism that was raised in the later reception of that work was in fact based on the historian’s treatment of merchants and especially on Chapter 129. As has been noticed by many specialists before, this chapter became the stumbling stone for later Confucian minded scholars. The major works of this early reception and the criticism they formulated will be briefly summarized here in chronological order.

31 For the probably most often quoted word from the mouth of Confucius relating to the difference in what a “gentleman” (*junzi* 君子) on the one hand and a “vulgar man” (*xiaoren* 小人) on the other hand would strive for, namely “morality” (*yi* 義) versus “profit” (*li* 利), see *Lunyu* 4.16: 君子喻於義，小人喻於利。

32 The rhymed prefaces are short summaries made for every chapter of the *Shiji*. Although they are all listed in the last, autobiographical Chapter 130 of the *Shiji*, there is in my view good reason to assume that they have all been conceived at one time, very probably at an early stage of the work’s overall compilation, and thus very probably, all written by Sima Qian’s father, Sima Tan.

33 *Shiji* 129.3319.

In his *Fayan* 法言 – “Model Words” – the Han scholar Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 B.C. – 18 A.D.) frequently uses the form of question-answer dialogues to give his moral views on certain issues at stake. Among the topics discussed were several chapters of the *Shiji*, to which a – probably fictitious – person refers by mentioning their titles, and Yang Xiong in an also quite laconic way responded by giving his own comment. This is how Chapter 129 of the *Shiji* is brought up by an anonymous person and how Yang Xiong as the master reacted:

「貨殖」。曰：「蚊。」曰：「血國三千，使持疏，飲水，褐博，沒齒無愁也。」
 “The people who accumulate wealth?” (The master) says: “Mosquitoes!” And he adds: “They suck the blood (of people) in so many states. If only people lived modestly, collected wild herbs, drank plain water and wore simple clothes, they would live without any sorrows until the end of their days!”³⁴

Although mosquitoes are not really dangerous insects, they are quite irritating, and, as Yang Xiong makes clear in his additional remark, the aspect he is thinking of when comparing merchants with mosquitoes is that they stir people up.³⁵ His reproach against merchants is apparently that they arouse people’s desires, to get things to eat and drink they did not have before, whereas Yang Xiong’s sympathies are apparently with a society in which people are modest and satisfied with what they have. In fact, it is primarily this sentence, introduced by the conditional particle *shi* 使 (if only ...) that shows that by the laconic *huozhi* 貨殖 – “the people who accumulate wealth” – Yang Xiong in fact must have referred to *Shiji* 129. The very first sentence of that chapter opens, as has been mentioned above, with a quote from *Laozi* 80 in which that “small country” is invoked and followed by the historian’s comment that “nowadays such an ideal state could not be attained any more”. Thus, if one takes these statements as “model words” according to the Confucian agenda, Yang Xiong seems to have recommended his reader to return to the Daoist ideal of a state in which there are no desires, no mobility and thus no merchants. Yang Xiong seems to recommend this as a counter remedy to the *Shiji*’s de facto statement that this was an illusory ideal simply because times had changed and with them the society.

Ban Biao 班彪 (3–54 BCE) who was certainly familiar with Yang Xiong’s critical attitude towards Sima Qian and his moral views as a historian wrote a text entitled “*Shiji lun*” 《史記》論 (Essay on the Records of Scribes) in which he criticized the chapter on the merchants in a very similar manner, saying:

序貨殖，則輕仁義而羞貧窮。

He (= Sima Qian) compiled the (chapter of the) merchants in a way that thinks little of humanity and morality and takes being lowly and poor as a shame.³⁶

34 *Fayan* 11.17. Cf. the translation by L’Haridon (2010, 124) and in this volume, 173. For a better understanding of the passage, see also the comment in *Fayan yishu* 11.460, 467f.

35 The word “mosquitoes” used by Yang Xiong here seems to refer to the passage in the rhymed preface to the *Shiji* where it is said that these people do no harm neither to the government nor to the hundred families – mosquitoes are also not really dangerous but they still do some harm to anyone whose blood they suck.

36 *Hou-Han shu* 40B.1326.

While the *Shiji* chapter on merchants is quite comprehensive, so that is difficult to know exactly which passage Ban Biao's critical words referred to, it may be helpful to know that Li Xian in his commentary to the *Hou-Han shu* quoted precisely the passage from Chapter 129 that has been rendered above.³⁷ Thus, at least according to Li Xian's interpretation, the target of Ban Biao's admonition was the idea propagated in this *Shiji* chapter that it is a shame to talk about humanity and morality for someone who lives under poor and commiserable circumstances.

It seems, however, that Ban Biao did not wholly reject the *Shiji*'s historiography. At the end of his essay he explicitly writes that it was Sima Qian's merit to have compiled the history from the beginning of the Han dynasty down to Emperor Wu of the Han. And he adds that,

誠令遷依五經之法言，同聖人之是非，意亦庶幾矣。

If only one could bring (Sima) Qian in accordance with the "model words" (*fayan*) provided by the Five Classics, so that (his judgements) were in harmony with what the Sage (i.e. Confucius) appreciated and what he condemned, then his basic ideas would be mostly right.³⁸

Ban Gu at the end of his biographical account of the Sima father and son in the *Hanshu* almost literally echoes the words that his father Biao had used to point out the *Shiji*'s deficiencies. Remarkably, in spite of the fact that the biography is devoted to both Sima Tan 司馬談 (?–110 BCE) and his son Qian, in his critical evaluations the responsibility for all that "tends to stray from the Sage" (*po miu yu shengren* 頗繆於聖人) is wholly loaded upon Sima Qian:

又其是非頗繆於聖人，[...]，述貨殖則崇勢利而羞賤貧，此其所蔽也。

Moreover, the judgements he passes on what would be right and what would be wrong tends to stray from the Sage. [...] In his account of the people who accumulate wealth, he praises those who make use of the circumstances to make profit and takes being lowly and poor as a shame. These are his weak points.³⁹

Certainly by far the most illuminating text regarding the question how the moral judgment of merchants and other money-makers passed by Ban Biao and Ban Gu differed from that underlying the historiography of the *Shiji* is Chapter 91 of the *Hanshu*, entitled *Huo zhi zhuan* 貨殖傳 (Biographies of People who Accumulated Wealth). While it is remarkable that the *Hanshu* contains such a chapter at all – none of the official histories that came after the *Hanshu* devoted a chapter to merchants –, it is even more interesting to comprehend the subtle "cut and paste" method by which a previous chapter that is morally dubious was reworked to become one that is morally suitable.

As Beatrice l'Haridon has shown by a direct comparison of parts of *Shiji* 129 and *Hanshu* 91, Ban Gu mainly uses two methods to achieve a thorough transformation of the original chapter's message. One method consisted in "keeping the main part of the narrative

37 *Shiji* 129.3272. See the translation above on p. 13. For Li Xian's comment, see *Hou-Han shu* 40A.1326.

38 *Hou-Han shu* 40A.1325.

39 *Hanshu* 62.2737f.

but to design it a very different meaning through slight changes in some crucial aspects of its organization and wording”; the other method, l’Haridon writes, “consist[ed] in removing from the chapter some key transitions which more or less imply the historian’s judgment.”⁴⁰

As for the first method, she describes the different treatment of Confucius’ disciples Zigong and Yan Hui in the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*. In both cases, the judgements passed on the wealthy Zigong and the poor Yanhui are based on quotations ascribed to Confucius, but while the one quoted in *Shiji* 129 praises Zigong as a paragon of virtue, the one quoted by Ban Gu praises Yan Hui as more virtuous than Zigong.⁴¹

As for the second method, the removing of what she calls “key transitions”, she takes as an example Fan Li’s biography. As we saw above, the *Shiji* in its biographical account of Fan Li describes him as a man who “was rich and still loved to exercise his own kind of virtue.”⁴² While the account on Fan Li in the *Hanshu* is almost word for word parallel to that in *Shiji* 129, it is precisely the appraisal of Fan Li as a virtuous man that has been omitted in the *Hanshu*. By thus censoring the text he had based his own account on, Ban Gu ensured that the historical facts *per se* were preserved and the “wrong” moral judgement was “made correct”.⁴³

If one examines the differences between the *Shiji*’s and the *Hanshu*’s ideological positions in Chap. 129 and 91, it seems important to compare also the contents of the two rhymed prefaces with each other. While the *Shiji*’s preface has already been translated above, here is what Ban Gu says about the central ideas of his chapter on the merchants:

四民食力，罔有兼業，大不淫侈，細不匱乏，蓋均無貧，遵王之法。靡法靡度，民肆其詐，偏上并下，荒殖其貨。侯服玉食，敗俗傷化。述貨殖傳第六十一。

If people of all layers of society gain their income from their physical labour, everyone concentrating on his own business, then the bigger ones will not become licentious and lavish, and the smaller ones will not become deficient and poor. Nobody then will be a pauper, and all will act in accordance with the kingly regulations. But if the regulations are scattered and the norms divided, the people will become extremely deceitful. They will exert force on those above and clique with those below, and they will excessively accumulate assets. Once the lords partake of delicate food, they will corrupt the customs and injure the morals; this is why I compiled the “Biographies of Those who Accumulated Wealth”.⁴⁴

To conclude from Ban Gu’s words, the hierarchies between those above and those beyond are most important, and this is what the kingly regulations, he argues, prescribe. What Ban Gu propagates here is a society in which all activities are regulated by the

40 Cf. l’Haridon in this volume, 177.

41 Cf. l’Haridon in this volume, 179.

42 Cf. the passage quoted above on p. 15.

43 Jurij Kroll who in the context of Yang Yun’s biography also reflects on Fan Li as a possible role model for Yang Yun even suggests that the *Shiji*’s positive portrayal of Fan Li might have been the main reason that caused Ban Gu to rewrite the *Shiji* chapter on people who accumulated wealth. See Kroll (2010), 31.

44 *Hanshu* 100B.4266.

central imperial rule and in which inherited status and rites are the basic pillars of society. If one compares these words with those in the rhymed preface of Chap. 129 in the *Shiji*, one gains the impression that this historiography is refreshingly open towards change and development, whereas the *Hanshu* represents a rather conservative stance, taking sides with those who object to any change and innovation. This impression fits well with what Michael Nylan says about Ban Gu's main reproach against the attitude displayed in the *Shiji*, namely that,

Ban expresses righteous outrage at the reversals of hereditary privileges that ensue when society order celebrates money and class, rather than official rank and status.⁴⁵

Among all the chapters of the *Shiji* text, Chapter 129 is probably the one which caused the rise of most critical voices in its later reception. Yang Yanqi who in his collection *Lidai mingjia ping Shiji* 歷代名家評《史記》, "Famous Historical Personalities Pass Their Judgements on the *Shiji*", assembled the voices of commentators of the *Shiji* who lived between the first century CE and the 20th century, listed altogether 28 comments related to Chapter 129.⁴⁶ Preceding this book was the *Shiji pinglin* 史記評林, "A Forest of Assessments of the *Shiji*", which contains the comments of many scholars arranged along with the *Shiji* text. Take, for example, the comment by Dong Fen 董份 (1510–1595), found before the beginning of the chapter proper, in which Dong again refers to Sima Qian's letter to Ren An, taking up Ban Gu's reproach that Sima Qian was full of anger and resentment due to the severe penalty he had suffered, and writes:

遷答任少卿自傷極刑家貧不足贖，故感而作〈貨殖傳〉專慕富利，班固極譏之是也。The fact that (Sima) Qian in his response (letter) to Ren Shaoqing (= Ren An) was deeply depressed because his family was too poor to be able to buy him free of the extreme penalty. Therefore, he was moved to write "Biographies of (People) Accumulating Wealth", full of desire for the advantage of being rich, and this is precisely why Ban Gu criticized him so sharply.⁴⁷

In sum, the passages rendered above may suffice to show in which respect Chapter 129 of the *Shiji* and especially the historian's assessment of merchants in this chapter had become an object of annoyance in the eyes of both state philosophers and historians who all felt responsible for ensuring that the historical exempla to instruct later generations were being interpreted in a morally correct way. Although there are, of course, many other aspects, such as the historian's judgement passed on "good officials", on "harsh officials" in the *Shiji* which have given rise to manifold discussions among later commentators, it still seems that the issue of how to treat merchants in the moral discourse was the one topic that was most stubbornly attacked by all those scholars who felt deeply rooted in the Confucian value system.

45 See Nylan in this volume, 134.

46 See Yang (1986), 726–744.

47 *Shiji pinglin* 129.891f. Cf. the translation by Beatrice l'Haridon in this volume, 175.

5 Yang Yun's Letter Versus Sima Qian's Letter – Two Documents of a “Subversive” Mind?

As mentioned above, Yang Yun was probably well familiar with his ancestors' work, and also with his grandfather's letter to Ren An. We have therefore good reason to assume that Yang Yun adopted values expressed by his forefathers and – at least to some extent – applied them in his own life. His decision to live the life of a farmer and merchant after he had been dismissed from court fits well with the characters sketched as paragons of common people in the *Shiji* who accumulate wealth and who by doing so practice their own form of virtue. Even though his grandfather Sima Qian never left his life at court in spite of his despicable situation there he must at least have dreamt of such a perspective, and the desire he expressed in his letter, namely that his family would have had enough financial means to avoid his penalty, may be taken as a hint at such a thinking.

But apart from what we may gather from the content of the two letters proper, we learn much about both men from the biographical accounts on Sima Qian and Yang Yun in the *Hanshu* from the context in which the letters are imbedded.

In Sima Qian's case, his biography in the *Hanshu* is based primarily on the autobiographical last chapter of the *Shiji*, with some additional material, among them the letter to Ren An, after which follows only the final appraisal by Ban Gu. As I have tried to show in a previous study, Ban Gu owed most of his biographical sketch of father and son Sima to Sima Qian's own account. He managed, however, to subtly change the message of a document that was meant by Sima Qian to justify why he decided not to commit suicide but to continue work on the *magnum opus* his father had begun, into an account that served Ban Gu's own ends. Ban Gu's ultimate purpose, as I have argued, was to evidence that Sima Qian's share of this work was wholly biased, due to the disgrace he had suffered, and the way he reworked Sima Qian's autobiographical account served him well to underline this aspect.⁴⁸

As for Yang Yun, let us take a look at how he is depicted in the *Hanshu*:

初，憚受父財五百萬，及身封侯，皆以分宗族。後母無子，財亦數百萬，死皆予憚，憚盡復分後母昆弟。再受訾千餘萬，皆以分施。其輕財好義如此。

Earlier, Yun had inherited five million (cash) from his father. After he himself had been ennobled as marquis, he distributed the whole sum among his clan members. His step-mother had no children of her own, so when she died she also left all she had to Yun. Yun for his part redistributed all this among his step-mother's elder and younger brothers. When he had again received more than ten million (cash), he also distributed it all. This is how much he disdained wealth and appreciated righteousness!

48 For a more detailed analysis of Sima Qian's autobiography and its use, and abuse, by Ban Gu, see Schaab-Hanke 2006a, rev. 2010.

In this stage of his life, Yang Yun is depicted by Ban Gu as someone to whom money did not mean much, since he even distributed it among the members of his family. By reading this passage, the reader may feel reminded of what has been said about Fan Li in Chap. 41 of the *Shiji*, namely that after he had left Yue and went to Tao, Fan Li “accumulated wealth by being engaged in a business and that he “three times in nineteen years accumulated a thousand pieces of gold, and twice divided these between distant relatives and those in want”.⁴⁹

No doubt, Ban Gu too had this passage about Fan Li in mind when he wrote these lines to depict Yun’s character, and he could reckon with readers who would have the same association. Both Fan Li and Yang Yun were serving their rulers for some time, and later decided to become entrepreneurs. At first sight, one will assume that to mention this generosity as a typical trait of Yang Yun’s personality was a friendly act by Ban Gu. But in combination with the above mentioned fact that Ban Gu had apparently omitted the positive appraisal of Fan Li as a virtuous man of his own kind from the original biographical account in the *Shiji* it is more plausible to assume that Ban Gu who had ultimately no positive picture of Fan Li rather intended to belittle Yang Yun by suggesting this similarity.

At closer reading of Yang Yun’s biography, one gains the impression that other details of Ban Gu’s picture of Yang Yun as well mainly served him to make plausible to the reader why, in spite of his brilliant talent and his indubitable qualifications, Yang Yun more or less inevitably brought about his own ruin. This is especially true for his relationship with his colleague Dai Changle, the man who later denounced Yang Yun blaming him for having displayed an inappropriate attitude towards the emperor. As Ban Gu reveals, Dai Changle was afraid that Yang Yun, who tended towards “revealing other people’s secret misbehaviors”, might accuse him publicly for his own wrong behavior. In Ban Gu’s words,

惇居殿中，廉潔無私，郎官稱公平。然憚伐其行治，又性刻害，好發人陰伏，同位有忤己者，必欲害之，以其能高人。由是多怨於朝廷，與太僕戴長樂相失，卒以是敗。
When Yun lived in the Palace, he was an incorrupt and just person, and palace gentlemen praised him, for his impartiality and justice. However, Yun boasted of his excellent conduct and administration, and besides, he was cruel and ruthless by nature, and he was fond of revealing other people’s secret misbehaviors; therefore, among his colleagues there were people who felt irritated by him and who wished to damage him, because his abilities surpassed those of others. For these reasons, there was much murmuring against him) at court. That he had broken with the Grand Coachman Dai Changle was eventually the reason for his perdition.

Combined with all other information on Yang Yun provided in his biography, his seemingly arrogant rejection of his friend’s advice to be more modest and to wait “shivering” until he would be allowed by the emperor to return to the court and, last but not least, the letter itself which displayed Yang Yun’s wholehearted acceptance of his new life as a farmer and merchant, all this suggests in my view that Ban Gu artfully

49 Compare the passage in *Shiji* 129.3257, translated above, p. 14.

conceived the biographical account of Yang Yun together with the letter to demonstrate that Yang Yun had a subversive character, that he indeed deserved to be executed on the charge of “high treason” against the emperor. Of course, since Yang Yun was Sima Qian’s grandson, here again, Ban Gu could corroborate the reproach that he, like his father Biao, had made it before with regard to Sima Qian, namely that the subversive traits of the grandfather once again became apparent in this generation.

The suggestion that both Sima Qian and his grandson Yun did indeed have a subversive character is further enhanced by the way Ban Gu suggests to his reader how in each case the letters he had included in the two biographies should be read. In Sima Qian’s biography he writes:

嗚呼！以遷之博物洽聞，而不能以知自全，既陷極刑，幽而發憤，書亦信矣。
Alas! With all his broad experience and knowledge, (Sima) Qian was still not capable of using his wisdom for keeping himself intact! Due to his having suffered this extreme penalty, he gave vent to his anger in his solitude, and this is something that is evidenced in his letter!⁵⁰

The impact of this subtle comment which suggests that Sima Qian in his judgement as a historian was biased due to the fact that he had suffered the bitter penalty of castration – a reproach that was first raised by Ban Biao and then echoed by his son Gu – was such that we find the traces of it in numerous works that comment on the historiography of the *Shiji*. Conspicuously, most of these comments are related to *Shiji* Chapter 129. And it is precisely Ban Gu’s suggestion that Sima Qian had written this chapter after he had suffered the penalty of castration and that his anger and resentments because his family did not have enough money to buy him free that has its impact on much later commentators as, for example, Dong Fen, whose remarks have been quoted above.⁵¹

Turning now to Yang Yun’s biography in the *Hanshu*, we find the same strategies as we found them with regard to Sima Qian. Here as well, the letter is introduced by a comment, which explains Yang Yun’s mood as he wrote the letter and what we should conclude from it. He writes:

憚宰相子，少顯朝廷，一朝以曖昧語言見廢，內懷不服，報會宗書曰：[...] Yun, the son of a chancellor, who had established a name for himself at court when young and who was from one day to the next thrown into disaster by some rumor the veracity of which was never cleared up, had a grudge in his heart and was not obedient, so in his letter of response to Sun Huizong he said: [...]

Very much like in Sima Qian’s biography, Ban Gu suggests that the letter Yang Yun wrote to Sun Huizong was imbued with resentment.⁵² The similarity in the way Ban Gu

⁵⁰ *Hanshu* 62.2738.

⁵¹ See above on p. 19.

⁵² Only recently I noticed that in her dissertation, Esther Klein also pointed out that resentment was “the one essential characteristic” that the three letters listed as the first three documents under the section “shu” in the *Wenxuan* have in common. See Klein 2010, 234.

comments in an almost psychological way about the true motivations behind both letters is striking. The conclusion which a reader of these comments will almost necessarily draw, namely that both the grandfather and his grandson must have had a quite subversive character, is thus, in my mind, one that was intended by Ban Gu.

This is perhaps the right moment to comment at least briefly on a question that has repeatedly been raised by some regarding Sima Qian's letter to Ren An, namely if that letter should be believed to be authentic or not. As I have argued in an earlier article, there are in my view good reasons to trust in the authenticity of the letter as being of the hand of Sima Qian. One of my arguments in favour of this authenticity was that a central passage of that letter is also found in Chapter 130 of the *Shiji*.⁵³ But more important in my view is that precisely the fact that Ban Gu used the letter in his biographical account of Sima Qian to blacken him makes it rather implausible that he or anyone else would have forged such a document prior to abusing it.⁵⁴ The same arguments that I have put forward in that article with regard to Sima Qian hold true also for Yang Yun's letter to Sun Huizong. But rather than being originally intended to be merely a piece of private correspondence it would seem quite plausible to me if both letters were in fact addressed to a larger readership, comparable with what we call an "open letter". All the more we may wonder why Yang Yun did not behave more cautious with his words – did he in fact believe that he and his family were wholly beyond the emperor's reach?

From all this it may be suggested that Ban Gu, similarly to what I have suggested earlier with regard to Ban Gu's biographical account of Sima Qian, included some materials which were in fact autobiographical in nature, to his biographical account of Yang Yun with the intention to cast him in a negative light. Such a procedure, as I have argued in a previous article with regard to Ban Gu's biographical account of Sima Qian, does not even seem to be so new. As I have tried to show, in Sima Qian's case, the inclusion of his letter to Ren An served Ban Gu to illustrate how questionable his moral authority as an historiographer was. In Yang Yun's case, the letter which revealed his character as "resentful" and "unobedient", in a way even seems to justify why Yang Yun was ultimately sentenced to death on imperial command.

Thus, we should always take into care that Ban Gu's intentions as regards both Sima Qian and his grandson Yun were indeed no friendly ones; his true intention was, in my view, to demonstrate to his readers that very much like Sima Qian, his descendant in the maternal line, Yang Yun, at closer looj revealed a quite subversive character trait. On the other hand, we should also acknowledge that if Ban Gu had not decided to include both letters in these biographies these documents very probably would have gone lost for posterity, and Xiao Tong would not have had the occasion to select the letters for his anthology. While we can only speculate about the reason why Xiao Tong in his *Wenxuan* had decided to arrange Yang Yun's letter to Sun Huizong in immediate succession after his

53 *Shiji* 130.3300. Cf. the parallel passage in Sima Qian's letter to Ren An in *Hanshu* 62.2735 (rendered in translation above, on p. 9).

54 For a detailed discussion of arguments against and in favor of the authenticity of the letter to Ren An, see Schaab-Hanke 2006b, rev. 2010.

grandfather's letter to Ren An, I would suggest that he also felt that Yang Yun wrote this letter with his grandfather's letter in mind, and that he thus intended to suggest the inner connection between these letters to an attentive reader of his anthology.

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