

Politik und Geschichtsschreibung im alten China: Pan-ma i-t'ung 班馬異同. (Studien zur Geistesgeschichte und Literatur in China, Band 18.) By Hans van Ess. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014. 2 vols., xxxii + 830 pp., Ill.

The work on this voluminous book, writes Hans van Ess in his preface, started more than eighteen years ago. Since realizing its central intention—to trace the different ideological agendas of the authors of two major historiographical works of the Han, the *Shiji* 史記 and the *Hanshu* 漢書—is a very complex endeavor indeed, and an extremely difficult one as well, it is no wonder that the completion of this magnum opus took such time.

For readers who are not experts on the *Shiji* or the *Hanshu*, it seems appropriate to provide a word of explanation regarding the phrase that van Ess chose as the subtitle of his book: “Pan-ma i-t’ung” (or in the more widely used *pinyin* transcription, which this reviewer prefers and will use hereafter, “Ban-Ma yitong”), translatable as “What is common and what is different in Ban [Gu] and [Si]ma [Qian].” As van Ess explains in his introduction, during the Song dynasty (960–1279) a whole branch of scholarly research emerged that concentrated on a comparison between the *Shiji*, whose authorship was generally ascribed to Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 86 BCE), and the *Hanshu*, with Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) as its main author. As an important representative of this genre, van Ess mentions a book by Ni Si 倪思 (1174–1220), who amalgamated the corresponding passages of both works and thus conceived a kind of hybrid version of them (p. 18). One may wonder if, by choosing this subtitle for his own work, van Ess meant that the book he envisioned is in line with this tradition. To decide on this, we will first have to take a closer look at his work and at the method he uses for his comparison of the two histories.

As van Ess points out, he confines his analysis of the *Hanshu* to the parts also covered in the *Shiji*, that is, primarily, to the events of the second century BCE; a careful examination of the historiographic principles of Ban Biao 班彪 (3–54) and Ban Gu will therefore be postponed to a later date (p. 4). By doing so, van Ess concentrates on the chapters of the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* in which the records of events overlap, and draws his conclusions from the details that differ from one text to the other.

The way in which Ban Gu made use of the *Shiji* to write his own version of the history of the Han is indeed striking. As van Ess recalls, out of the 100 chapters that compose the *Hanshu*, sixty-seven were copied either verbatim or almost verbatim from the corresponding parts of the *Shiji* (p. 5). Interestingly, in thirty-two cases, even the historiographer’s personal comments, mostly found at the end but sometimes at the beginning of chapters, were either fully adopted or at least used as the basis for Ban Gu’s own judgments. Van Ess cites the biography of Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE) as an example of appraisals that have been adopted wholesale by Ban Gu. In other cases, Sima Qian’s appraisals have only been slightly changed: thus, in the appraisal of one of the followers of Emperor Gaozu 漢高祖 (256 or 247–195, r. 202–195 BCE), the founder of the Han dynasty, Ban Gu simply deleted

hints to his sympathies for the Huang-Lao 黃老 ideology found in Sima Qian's text (p. 28). Considering the high number of textual doublets, one really wonders how Ban Gu was able to use this method to write a history of the Han and still have it accepted as his own work.

The idea that there was an urgent need for a new history of the Han, based in some way on the *Shiji* but with new moral standards, is found in the form of a personal comment by Ban Gu at the end of his biography of Sima Qian.¹ In fact, most of these ideas had already been formulated by his father, Ban Biao, in an essay that is preserved only in the biography of the two Bans in the *Hou-Han shu* 後漢書.² What Ban Biao and Ban Gu blamed Sima Qian for was that he had deviated considerably from the Confucian Classics in his appraisal of the historical events and that he favored what van Ess calls the Huang-Lao ideology instead. They also said that in his account of the wandering knights (*youxia* 游俠) Sima Qian showed less sympathy for recluses than for criminals, and that regarding money he held profit making in higher esteem than living in poverty. With these criticisms in mind, we are in a position to take a closer look at van Ess's approach in his analysis of the different ideological attitudes of the authors of the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*.

Before doing so, however, two major problems facing every researcher starting to compare the contents of the *Shiji* with those of the *Hanshu* must be addressed, to wit, the question of authorship and that of authenticity. Van Ess, who is perfectly aware of these problems, deals with both of them in his introduction.

Regarding authorship, he duly mentions early *Shiji* and *Hanshu* commentators as well as more recent sinological research focusing on a possibly dual authorship of the *Shiji*. He mentions that work on the *Shiji* had probably been already started by Sima Qian's father Sima Tan 司馬談 (?–110 BCE); he also briefly refers to studies devoted to single chapters of the *Shiji* that according to some scholars appear to have been taken from the *Hanshu* in order to fill lacunae already mentioned by Ban Gu and even by earlier authors. However, these problems notwithstanding, van Ess decided to base his study on two main working hypotheses, one of which does concern the question of authorship. He argues that both the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* were what he calls "Teamarbeiten" (joint efforts) whose later authors knew the motives of their predecessors well and strived to continue their own work in the same spirit (p. 39). As for the problem of authenticity, van Ess decides in favor of what he calls the "lectio facilior." He proposes to take the *Shiji* in general as the earlier text and to assume that Ban Gu knew this text in its entirety, arguing that when he speaks of how Ban Gu "copied" or "changed his template," this means that in his own view it "makes more sense within the scope of this study" to take this traditional view as his point of departure (p. 41).

¹ *Hanshu* 62.2737; cf. van Ess, p. 14f.

² *Hou-Han shu* 40.1325ff; cf. Van Ess, p. 16, n. 54. See also his discussion of the question how the distinctly less critical attitude of Ban Biao, compared with that of Ban Gu, could be explained.

In his twelve thematically organized chapters, van Ess traces the different ideological agendas of the authors of the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*. What follows is an attempt to highlight the results of these comparisons.

In chapter one, titled “The Founder of the Dynasty” (“Der Dynastiegründer”), van Ess begins his analysis with Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇 (259–210 BCE) and his treatment in the *Shiji*. As he emphasizes, the *Shiji* is, despite its first chapter tracing history back to the monarchs of a remote mythical past, mainly a history of two dynasties, the Qin and the Han. The development of Qin from a barbarian state into the first dynasty that unified all the feudal states under one central rule is a recurring theme in many chapters of the *Shiji*, especially in the “Tables” section. The judgment passed by the author of the *Shiji* regarding the reasons why Qin was bound to collapse so quickly after the unification is also, as van Ess shows, central to the historian’s opinion on why the Han had a chance to assume power.

As for Xiang Yu, Liu Bang’s companion and then antagonist during the period preceding Liu Bang’s enthronement, van Ess points out that, whereas in the *Shiji* one of the “Annals” chapters (ch. 7) is entirely devoted to Xiang Yu, Ban Gu decided for his part to concede him only a biography (ch. 31) since he was the ruler of the empire for only a short period of time, suggesting that he had not received the Mandate of Heaven (p. 60). As for the annals devoted to Liu Bang in the *Shiji* (ch. 8) and in the *Hanshu* (ch. 1), van Ess comes to the result that while most of the *Shiji* account has been copied by Ban Gu into the *Hanshu*, there are some subtle changes concerning the military successes of Liu Bang, his character, and his relation to Xiang Yu. Whereas in the *Shiji* account of Liu Bang leaves the reader puzzled as to why Liu Bang succeeded in becoming emperor at all, Van Ess writes that according to the *Hanshu*, Liu Bang, though a bit stubborn

Chapter two, “Consolidation of the Dynasty” (“Die Festigung der Dynastie”), examines how the two historians dealt with the period between the reign of the dynastic founder and that of Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 181–87 BCE). Basing his analysis primarily on a comparison between chapter 9 of the *Shiji* and chapter 3 of the *Hanshu*, van Ess argues that Sima Qian’s attitude toward Empress Lü 呂太后 (?–180 BCE) was less negative than Ban Gu’s, Ban Gu questioning the very basis of her legitimacy as a ruler and treating her only as the wife of Emperor Gao. As for their view of Emperor Wen 文帝 (180–157 BCE), both historians largely agree, although, according to van Ess, Ban Gu criticized him for being too weak.

Chapter three (“Der Adel”) centers on the nobility, or, more precisely, on the administrative principle of enfeoffment. Van Ess emphasizes that the topic of enfeoffment was of central importance to the author of the *Shiji*, who thought that a state would only endure if there were centers of power separate from the imperial center. According to van Ess, Ban Gu, for his part, spoke in favor of only one powerful center, namely, the emperor himself, supported by capable officials.

Chapter four concentrates on “Guests and Retainers” (“Gäste and Gefolgsleute”). Basing his discussion principally on chapters 75–78 in the *Shiji*, van Ess points out

how positively the *Shiji* portrays those members of the lower gentry that used to assemble at their courts all kinds of individuals who lived off their wealth and offered them their services—the so-called *youxia*.³ Interestingly, van Ess finds in the *Shiji* that its author expresses a very positive attitude toward both the hosts and their guests. According to him, an important lesson demonstrated by the hosts is that they were not only capable of finding loyal men who were willing even to risk their lives for them, but also of keeping close to them, something that the ruler of the empire should be capable of doing as well. In the time of Emperor Wu, the system of clients was in decay, and the author of the *Shiji* seems to express regret about this development, seeing his role as a historian to preserve them in historical memory. Ban Gu, for his part, does not show much sympathy for such people. On the contrary, he seems to see a danger in these centers of power where men who had mastered different techniques and possessed different kinds of knowledge were attracted to nobles who used them to their own ends.

In chapter five, titled “The New Elite” (“Neue Elite”), van Ess illustrates how differently the two historians evaluated the role of the old gentry with respect to that of the new officials of the Han bureaucracy. As he shows, referring to several exemplary biographies, Sima Qian blames the way members of the old gentry were accused, sentenced, sometimes even executed by what he calls “harsh officials.” Ban Gu copied both the titles and large parts of the group biographies of “harsh officials” (*kuli* 酷吏) and “benevolent officials” (*xunli* 循吏) from the *Shiji*.⁴ However, he changed the judgments passed by Sima Qian in subtle details and came to some of the “harsh officials” defense.

Chapters six and seven focus on the subject of war. Chapter six concentrates on the attitude that Sima Qian and Ban Gu display toward war in the two histories. As van Ess emphasizes, despite his lack of fondness for war Sima Qian was a specialist on the subject; the wars he especially disliked, yet wrote much about, are those led by Emperor Wu. Basing his analysis first on the chapters covering the Xiongnu 匈奴, against whom Emperor Wu waged several wars, van Ess finds that there again Ban Gu copied large parts of the *Shiji* text.⁵ However, the almost identical text in the *Hanshu* displays slight but important variations that show how different from Sima Qian's was Ban Gu's attitude toward the Xiongnu, their character, and, closely related to this, the question of the necessity to combat them. In sum, the main difference between the two authors, according to van Ess, is that while Sima Qian condemns Emperor Wu's wars, especially those led against the Xiongnu and in Central Asia, Ban Gu largely justifies them, accepting the emperor's demands for a continuous military presence in central Asia (p. 388).

³) For the group biographies of *youxia*, see *Shiji* 124, *Hanshu* 92.

⁴) For the “Benevolent Officials”, see *Shiji* 119, *Hanshu* 89; for the “Harsh officials”, see *Shiji* 122, *Hanshu* 90.

⁵) The respective chapters on the Xiongnu are *Shiji* 110 and *Hanshu* 94.

Chapter seven takes a closer look at the generals and their treatment in both histories, starting with Sima Qian's contention that choosing the right generals is of utmost importance. Pointing to the fact that the chapter on the Xiongnu in the *Shiji* is surrounded by chapters devoted to the generals of the Han, van Ess compares the ways each author judges them, their characters, and their success or lack thereof. Based on a number of examples, he illustrates how Sima Qian wholly condemned most of the generals, while Ban Gu apparently tried his best to rewrite the most disrespectful stories told by his predecessor in a more morally sanctioned form. He concludes that, on the whole, the biographies of generals written by Sima Qian describe most of the wars of Emperor Wu's time as insufficiently prepared and led by the wrong generals, a picture that Ban Gu apparently strived to correct (p. 436).

Chapters eight and nine cover what van Ess subsumes under the title "The Cult" ("Der Kult"). They discuss not only the monographs of the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* dealing with rites and music, the pitch-pipes, the calendar, and the *feng* 封 and *shan* 禪 rituals,⁶ but also two chapters from the "biographies" section in the *Shiji* that have no counterpart in the *Hanshu*, namely, those on physicians and diviners (ch. 105 and 128). These two chapters, in addition to the one on the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices, are placed under the subheading "Sima Qian and the Supernatural" ("Ssu-ma Ch'ien und das Übernatürliche") (pp. 525-59).

In his analysis of the "Monograph on Rites" in the *Shiji* (ch. 23), van Ess draws an interesting comparison between the introductory passage, which obviously quotes from the *Xunzi* 荀子, and its parallel in the received *Xunzi* text. As he shows, Sima Qian very probably used the *Xunzi* with only slight modifications, transposing what was once related to a multi-state system onto the centralized empire of the Han, the main message being that the emperor (that is, Emperor Wu) should rely more on rites (which is to say, less on the "masters of special techniques," *fangshi*) and spend more time in his palace (which is to say, undertake fewer journeys for the purpose of sacrificing to the gods and various spirits). In other words, according to van Ess, the author of the *Shiji* clearly criticized Emperor Wu for his careless treatment of the ritual reform and for laying so much emphasis on his military activities. As for Ban Gu's own emperor, Emperor Zhang 章帝 (r. 75-88 CE), van Ess reads the "Monograph on Rites" in the *Hanshu* in a manner that suggests that Ban Gu intended to encourage him to undertake the long expected reform of the rites (p. 446).

Regarding the "Monograph on Music," van Ess finds that there too the main intention of the author of the *Shiji* was to criticize Emperor Wu, first of all for having installed the new sacrificial hymns composed by the court protégé Li Yannian 李延年 (?-82 BCE), music that Sima Qian obviously disliked. According to van Ess's reading, Ban Gu, who did not condemn the new music composed during Emperor Wu's reign but harbored no special sympathy for it, used the corresponding

⁶ See the *Shiji* chapters 23-26, 28, and 29, versus the *Hanshu* chapters 21, 22, and 25.

chapter in his work mainly to encourage Emperor Zhang to institute the long overdue reform of the ceremonial music.

The comparison of the chapter on the *feng* and *shan* rites in the *Shiji* with the chapter on state rituals in the *Hanshu* is, as already seen, placed under the subtitle “Sima Qian and the Supernatural” (pp. 525-44). In fact, the rather short analysis of this important topic does not say much about the “supernatural.” It discusses the various theories regarding the time cycles within which dynasties flourish and decline as well as the question of whether Sima Qian and Ban Gu believed in one or other of these theories. The discussion is rather confusing, however. In his short conclusion, van Ess writes that Sima Qian seems to have intended to criticize Emperor Wu through the use of veiled words, and that by describing the failure of the First Emperor when he proceeded to perform the sacrifices Sima Qian obviously meant to warn against the possible fall of the Han (p. 544).

The next chapter (chapter ten) deals with what van Ess calls “The World of Commodities” (“Die Welt der Waren”). The analysis deals with two chapters of the “Monographs” section in the *Shiji*, viz. chapter 29, which is concerned with “Waterways,” that is, channels and irrigation projects, and chapter 30 on “Balanced Standards” (“Ausgeglichener Standard”), together with the “Biographies” section devoted to “Merchants” (“Überlieferungen über die Händler”) (chapter 129). The corresponding chapters in the *Hanshu* are chapter 29 (“On Waterways”)—of which van Ess says that it runs almost wholly parallel in both works (pp. 563-67)—chapter 24 (“On Commodities and Economics”), and chapter 91 (“On Merchants”). Van Ess informs us that he deliberately wrote this chapter of his book last, because Ban Biao, in his famous essay on the *Shiji*, mentions Sima Qian’s positive attitude toward the merchants and money-making in general as one of the aspects that need thorough revision: one would therefore expect that the author of the *Hanshu* maintained a distinctly different position in this matter. Van Ess also refers to the *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論, in which the individuals pleading in favor of a state that strives for profit were attacked by Confucian scholars seeking to persuade the emperor to follow the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius, who were strongly against the foremost pursuit of profit: the main question tackled in this chapter is how Sima Qian and Ban Gu positioned themselves in this discussion. As Emperor Wu needed a large amount of capital to fund his expansionist policies, the state established monopolies on the sale of goods such as salt, iron, and alcohol, which ran against the interests of rich families. Sima Qian, van Ess suggests, criticized Emperor Wu’s policies, while Ban Gu apparently had nothing against expansionist policies that favored the state monopolies.

Chapters eleven and twelve, “Was Sima Qian a Confucian?” (“War Ssu-ma Ch’ien ein Konfuzianer?”) and “The Rebel” (“Der Rebell”), concentrate on Sima Qian as an individual and as an ideologist. Bearing in mind that Ban Gu blamed Sima Qian for his critical attitude toward the Confucians and for the positive words he found for people one could justly subsume under the term “swashbucklers” (“Haudegen”), van Ess examines the attitude that the author of the *Shiji* displays toward several

personalities who played an important role in what may be called the “Confucian” tradition. According to him, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE), though addressed by Sima Qian in his last, autobiographical, chapter in a way that suggests that Dong was one of his teachers, is on the whole more ridiculed than acknowledged in the *Shiji*. Master Kong himself is praised more for having been able to achieve something despite his low social origin than for his compilation of the “Six Disciplines.” The dominant tenor of the biographical account of Confucius is that he was unable to find someone who would put his talents to good use. Similarly, Master Meng, one of the early philosophers in the school of Confucius, is blamed for his lack of success, in striking contrast to Zou Yan 騶衍 (ca. 305–240 BCE), who apparently was well aware of the necessity of keeping rulers continuously frightened of the heavenly cycles. Another example provided by van Ess is the treatment in the *Shiji* of the two recluses Bo Yi 伯夷 and Shu Qi 叔齊, who were paragons of the Confucian virtuous attitude of resigning from office in times of bad rule, but about whom Sima Qian expresses doubts regarding their motives for starving themselves in the wilderness. In his last chapter, “The Rebel,” van Ess, basing himself on all the evidence he has provided so far, comes to the conclusion that Ban Gu’s reproach of Sima Qian’s criticism of the Confucians was indeed justified, and that he was right to suggest that Sima Qian had a rebellious mind.

Perhaps the most intriguing impression one is left with after reading the twelve chapters of this work is what one might describe as “having been allowed a glimpse into a manipulator’s laboratory.” What van Ess illustrates splendidly with regard to each of the aspects he has chosen to examine for his comparison is that the *Hanshu* was an apparently very successful attempt to use large parts of the book written by Ban Gu’s predecessor Sima Qian in order to produce a new book with a completely new message through copying, correcting, rearranging, and in many cases making merely minute changes to the original. Even though others have already arrived at similar conclusions, at least in individual case studies, this is the first systematic and thorough attempt to reveal how Ban Gu’s method worked. What we find at the end is, up to a point, plagiarism on a grand scale. In van Ess’ own words, “the present book is a study on how one may use texts and misuse them to one’s own ends when one is unable to discard them in their entirety—a cultural practice that is, of course, not confined to China” (p. 768).

The reason why Ban Gu could not discard his predecessor’s work in its entirety is well explained by van Ess: the *Shiji* was simply too well-known, already by the time of the two Bans. The fact that both Ban Biao in his essay on the *Shiji* and Ban Gu in the biography of Sima Qian in the *Hanshu* recommended the composition of a new work conceived on a different ideological basis fully justifies the conclusion that a work—the *Shiji*—regarding which a paradigmatic shift was deemed necessary was merely redesigned to effect such a shift.

Yet it occurs to this reviewer that van Ess’s admittedly courageous and very consequent treatment also presents some problems. To begin with, the material he assembles in each of his chapters is so vast that even a reader well acquainted with

the contents of the *Shiji* will find it difficult to keep up with the author during his stroll through the two historical works. In fact, his treatment is also a sort of hybrid amalgamation in which he constantly switches back and forth, telling his reader that here Sima Qian has said something that Ban Gu left out, and that there Ban Gu slightly modified a sentence, left a passage from the *Shiji* intentionally out, and wrote something new instead. This is probably how van Ess came to choose the subtitle “Pan-ma i-t’ung.” It makes sense, but it is also quite confusing at times, especially when van Ess, as he often does, draws on passages from other places than the two corresponding chapters in the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* he is comparing, not infrequently forgetting to add a footnote that would help a reader to locate the relevant passage.

Another problem arises from the fact that van Ess lays so much emphasis on reading the *Shiji* passages from the perspective of the *Hanshu*. He even goes so far as to say, “Often the reader understands a passage from the *Shiji* only after becoming aware that the corresponding passage in the *Hanshu* has been written as a refutation of it” (p. 41). This is troubling not just because van Ess, by pursuing this line of argument, calls into question the treatment of the *Shiji* by specialists who lack a similar knowledge of the *Hanshu* (and there do not seem to be that many people who are specialists of both works, apart from himself). Even more problematic is the fact that, following his advice to read the *Shiji* from the perspective of the *Hanshu*, one runs the risk of misinterpreting the original intention of the author of the *Shiji*. Thus, we should be cautious even when reading the summaries of *Shiji* passages that van Ess provides as a contrast to the corresponding *Hanshu* texts, since we must keep in mind that he applies his own advice to his reading of the *Shiji*, interpreting it “through Ban Gu’s eyes.”

A further problem, closely related to van Ess’s reading of the *Shiji*, is that he does not confine his analysis to the personal comments made by the historiographer, but takes a given chapter in its entirety as the basis of his discussion of the respective ideological attitudes of the two authors, commenting on each detail in the text that shows differences from its counterpart in the *Hanshu*. However, as several *Shiji* scholars have clearly demonstrated in a variety of case studies, many passages in the received text of the *Shiji* have been largely copied or summarized from earlier sources, which leads to the question: what if the ideas that van Ess attributes to the author of the *Shiji*, based on Ban Gu’s reading of the text, are in fact derived from earlier sources? Just to take the example of what van Ess calls the “yu-hsia Ideale” (p. 224, esp. n. 11), that is, the moral code of the wandering knights, this is a concept of overriding importance in texts such as the *Lüshi chungiu* 呂氏春秋, the *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策, the *Guoyu* 國語, and the *Huainanzi* 淮南子. Supposing that the author of the *Shiji* made use of these texts in his depiction of historical events, how can we know for sure that the *Shiji* is not just mirroring much older ideas and ideals that Sima Qian simply imported into his own text? Even if Ban Gu makes Sima Qian responsible for such ideas and ideals, should we not, when searching for the true

intention of the author of the *Shiji*, begin with a thorough analysis of the ideological agendas of the sources he used in the composition of his work?

Another important aspect to consider is the way van Ess deals with the question of authenticity, a question particularly thorny with regard to the chapters of the *Shiji* that were reproduced identically, or nearly so, in the *Hanshu*—precisely the ones that are the focus of interest here. As we have seen, van Ess establishes from the start as a working hypothesis a “lectio facilior” approach to the two works—the *Shiji* being read as the earlier and the *Hanshu* as the later text. In his “Conclusions” (“Schluß”), he claims that the comparison of the two texts has demonstrated “all too clearly” that there is hardly any reason to assume that the *Hanshu* might contain versions of chapters predating those provided in the received text of the *Shiji*. “Ultimately both books,” he writes, “were completely different from each other, and it seems more plausible to assume that Ban Gu corrected the *Shiji*, than vice versa” (p. 767). He mentions a “hypothesis,” already proposed in the third century CE, according to which at least ten chapters of the *Shiji* had been lost and were filled in by a later hand—a fact, interestingly enough, also suggested in the bibliographical chapter of the *Hanshu*⁷—and argues that we will perhaps never know for certain if these chapters were really lacking in the *Shiji* or not. And he continues saying that this question is not really all that relevant because “the chapters in question cannot have been written by bunglers, and their contents in the received edition make sense in the general context of the *Shiji*.” In some parts, he adds, the comparison with the *Hanshu* demonstrates that it must be considered quite probable that Ban Gu already had these chapters in the same form at his disposal, since he seems to refer to them in his own account, at times in an apparently ironical fashion (p. 771). In my view, the establishment of a working hypothesis stipulating that the chapters in the *Shiji* that correspond to chapters in the *Hanshu* chronologically preceded them is indeed well founded. However, taking the results of a reading influenced by this working hypothesis as evidence to corroborate the same supposition does not really seem convincing. Rather, it comes close to being a circular argument.

Turning now to the problem of authorship, we have seen that in his introduction van Ess acknowledges, at least in principle, that both the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* were the products of authorial teams rather than of two individual authors. Yet in the conclusion it becomes quite clear that the liberal tenor of the introduction, including the willingness to entertain the possibility of dual authorship as a viable explanation for differences regarding the intentions or ideological inclinations expressed in each one of the texts, is not something that van Ess really seems to have taken seriously. Instead, he concludes that, based on his reading of the *Shiji*, he has found no evidence supporting the idea that some parts of the work reveal ideological attitudes different from other parts. On the contrary, he adds, “to me it looks as if the Bans read the *Shiji* as one consistent work, without distinguishing between its individual parts or even its chapters” (p. 770). Yet, here again the problem

⁷ See *Hanshu* 30.1714: 太史公百三十篇。十篇有錄無書。

becomes evident that in his reading of the *Shiji* Ban Gu—or, as van Ess tentatively writes, “the Bans”—does not represent the ultimate authority capable of answering the question of whether or not a single, consistent idea and ideology characterizes the entire *Shiji*. For scholars who have read Yang Xiong’s 揚雄 *Fayan* 法言, the term *duozhi* 多知, which can be rendered as “to know (too) much,” may come to mind, suggesting that if someone has too many preconceived ideas, he will not be able to analyze something without pretension, which may prove a severe obstacle to understanding.

Last but not least, I would like to add some remarks regarding what may be termed the “political approach” on which van Ess places so much emphasis in his study. It will not have escaped those familiar with his research that the book bears a title very similar to that of his doctoral thesis published in 1993, with the difference that the earlier book was devoted to “Politics and Scholarship in Han Times” and dealt primarily with what has come to be called the “Old Text” / “New Text” debate.⁸ In other words, the political perspective has long been one of Hans van Ess’s favorite topics for research. In the last lines of the final page of this new study, van Ess emphasizes that both the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* were the products of political partisanship (p. 774). Elsewhere in the same chapter, he speculates about a possible candidate for whom Sima Qian might have written his book, to wit, Emperor Wu’s heir apparent, who instigated a rebellion in 91 BCE. Such partisanship, van Ess adds, is suggested by Ban Gu, not only in his mention of the fact that two of Sima Qian’s friends, Tian Ren 田仁 and Ren An 任安, were themselves partisans of the prince, but also in Ban Gu’s decision to place Sima Qian’s *Hanshu* biography precisely before the passage in which he discusses the crown prince’s fate (p. 772).

This search for concrete hints at political partisanship is certainly remarkable, but I wonder if centering the inquiry on such short-term political affairs can be considered adequate when it applies to such a huge undertaking as the *Shiji*, justly designated by some as the first universal history in Chinese. Hans van Ess is convinced that throughout his work Sima Qian’s intention was to censure his own ruler, in veiled words yet severely, to the extent that one gains the impression from his reading that the *Shiji* was merely conceived as a piece of criticism directed at Emperor Wu. But would such a painstaking, long-term project have ever been started for merely political reasons? Rather, as I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere, this project seems to have been the joint effort of an authorial team composed of Sima Tan and Sima Qian, two men who despite their shared identity as *taishigong* 太史公 (His Honor the Grand Scribe), ensuring the authority of their judgements, approached their work from very different backgrounds. Sima Tan was still deeply rooted in the tradition of divination, but the education he was able to give his son Sima Qian enabled the latter to treat history more as a sort of pedagogical lesson and to read earlier sources from a primarily exegetical perspective.

⁸ Hans van Ess, *Politik und Gelehrsamkeit in der Zeit der Han (202 v. Chr. – 220 n. Chr.): Die Alttext / Neutext-Kontroverse* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993).

In addition, Sima Qian's grandson Yang Yun 楊惲 continued his forebears' project in a way he deemed appropriate by evaluating and recording things for his own generation.

Without a doubt, this book will find its place on the desk of every sinologist concerned with early Chinese historiography. Scarcely anyone else has come to know the *Hanshu* as well as Hans van Ess, and only a few have read the *Shiji* as systematically as he has. As we have seen, his comparison of the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*, a complex and difficult endeavor, is based on several working hypotheses related to the problems of the authorship and authenticity of the chapters that are the focus of his research. The decisions he has made have enabled him to cut the Gordian knot and thus bring this work to completion. However, we should still be aware that both the question of authorship and that of authenticity remain topics in need of further consideration. Future researchers should take this book as a stepping stone for their own investigations, preferably in the form of various single case studies.

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