



The Recording of History

Ziqing Jack Wang

The recording of history was born from the innate desire of humankind to take note of the past. 70,000 years ago, after the Cognitive Revolution, when humans fulfilled the needs of survival, including food and shelter, they had the time and attention to harness their language and creativity to document the past. While it might be true that the primary cultures scattered across the world had some form of historical recording, the existence of such forms has been difficult to prove and analyze. Systematic historical recording only began with the emergence of organized societies and the invention of a writing system. This essay will examine the oracle bones of Shang China, Si Ma Qian's work *The Historical Records*, and Roman historian Livy's writings to demonstrate the universal nature of historical writing.

China's culture has greatly emphasized the recording of the past. The essence of its culture is composed of the reverence for history on different levels. On the family level, in traditional Chinese culture, it is customary to keep a family tree and pay tribute to the ancestors regularly. On the state level, Chinese governments, in most dynasties, set up government positions for historians. Emperors viewed the recording of the past as an indispensable and honorary act. In China, history almost becomes a powerful religion that unites all citizens. Historical recording first became systematic more than 3000 years ago during the Shang Dynasty. Some excavated oracle bones contain evidence of such activities. For example, one oracle bone documented the life and accomplishments of one of the first kings of the Shang Dynasty, who helped establish the basis of the empire. Other oracle bones documented past prayers and the results from these prayers. Although one can argue that the oracle bone inscriptions do not belong to the scientific tradition of history as a subject (since many are in the form of religious prayers), but as Hegel claimed, historical recording usually begins with the foundation of the state. Thus, the intrinsic criteria for determining historiography should be the presence of a writing system and a robust functioning state. The messages on the bones and the environment in which the bones were created fulfill both criteria, justifying the oracle bones as a primary form of historical recording.

In later eras, historical recording would gradually evolve to become one of the central tasks of Chinese scholars and even government officials. During the Han Dynasty, after prolonged warfare during the Spring and Autumn Period, China entered a time of restoration and cultural development. As the government gradually shifted the focus from preparing warfare to encouraging cultural creations, historiography advanced substantially as well. During this time, Sima Qian, one of the most respected historical Chinese scholars, started composing his tome, *The Historical Records*. *The Historical Records* can be divided into sections, each covering a certain period of Chinese history or an aspect of Chinese traditional culture. The content is about the achievements of past emperors, the rise and fall of different kingdoms, the specific

records of construction, finance, etc. Sima Qian can be regarded as one of China's earliest historians who systematically attempted to create a "database" for Chinese history.

The Historical Records was a revolutionary piece of writing at the time. Its impacts have been long-lasting. It set the tradition of official historical recording in China. Some contemporary Chinese scholars even claim it established a humanist belief in the culture. Previous to Sima Qian, historical recording was more sporadic and undertaken by various social groups. After Sima Qian, historical recording became more centralized and gained greater attention from the imperial courts. *The Historical Records* also created standards for scholars when conducting historical research or writing. The first standard regarded the scope of historical recording. From the Han Dynasty onwards, Chinese historical writing focused on the deeds of emperors and accomplished individuals and the specific occurrence of significant events. The second standard regarded the rigor of historical recording. Chinese historians began to adopt a more rigorous and scientific approach to history, aiming to be as factual as possible and check their work against previous recordings. Finally, *The Historical Records* marked the advent of a new method of historiography that combined the knowledge of political science, economics, and other related fields to weave a single complex narrative. This method was championed by Chinese scholars arguably until the introduction of modern Western historiography in the early twentieth century.

At the same time as Sima Qian, the Western hemisphere also witnessed the rise of prominent historians. The Mediterranean world had a rich convention of recording history. More than 2500 years ago, the ancient Greeks systematically recorded and studied past events. Figures such as Herodotus and Thucydides are just two examples. The Romans, having inherited the culture from the Greeks, pushed the development of historiography further. An outstanding historian at that time was Livy (59 BCE to 17 CE), known for his exhaustive research and documentation of Roman history. While he was unique among Roman historians in that he did not participate in politics or religious activities, he saw history in "personal and moral terms," meaning that he interpreted the past more sensually or philosophically. Livy was one of the first historians to see history regarding significant individuals and personalities rather than political clashes.

Livy's works left profound marks on Western historiography. First, he reshaped the style of historical writing to be more accessible to a greater audience. He made history more vivid and hence resonating and significant. One evidence of this attempt to reshape historiographical writing would be an increase in the variety of syntax in Livy's works. At some moments, he would utilize long, periodic clauses to depict a scene in detail; at other times, he would switch to short and abrupt sentences to delineate the rapidity of action. Another piece of evidence would be his diction. Previously, historiography involved dry and formal use of words. Livy overthrew this convention and employed a wide range of lyrical or dramatic vocabulary. Such major changes in the writing style impressed many of his audiences, who were deeply drawn to the eloquence and vividness of his narrations. From Livy onwards, history would not be a subject



only suited for the rich and powerful but rather one that anyone could approach with a scholarly mind.

Second, Livy's focus on the moral and personal aspects of history significantly influenced future historians and the scope of Western historiography. Livy felt the decline of morality during his time with peculiar intensity, noting, "Where would you find nowadays in a single individual that modesty, fairness and nobility of mind which in those days belonged to a whole people?" The responsibility of historical recording should be to offer examples and warnings to an individual and their country. As a result, Livy tried to shift history from a purely political study to a subject that concentrated on human nature and the intrinsic interactions between individuals in social settings. Historians should be more interested in the individual human and the underlying patterns of societal progression. Livy inspired historians such as St. Augustine and even Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant or Friedrich Hegel to take a similar path. For instance, Hegel devoted a large share of his focus to "world-historical individuals" and aimed to explain, in detail, the factors pushing social development through time.

Overall, by examining the oracle bones of Shang China, the Han historian Sima Qian, and the Roman historian Livy, historical recording appeared to be a vital activity for civilizations throughout different periods. When one dives deeper into the motives of historical recording, the question is: What is the role and value of history? As Nietzsche claimed, history serves life in various ways. For some, history provides courage. "The great which once existed was at least possible once and may well again be possible sometime." With this knowledge, ambitious individuals can act with greater audacity and determination. For others, history provides a sense of belonging. Finding belonging in history is especially a tradition in China. Each individual has an intimate relationship with their family, city, and national history. When history can breathe life into the individual, then historiography is the natural process in which people attempt to find this powerful source of vitality.

In the modern context, while one must acknowledge the importance of history, it is also essential to be critical of history. As history breathes life into an individual, it can silently bind its tentacles around that individual and "strangle" them. History often preserves life but fails to generate it. People can readily use history to satisfy their desires to connect with memories yet would eventually find it difficult to innovate or break historical conventions. As this process unfolds itself, humankind can very well decay and degenerate. People must bring up new inspirations and ideas to navigate increasingly complex societies. With the constant advancement of groundbreaking technologies, the unspoken rules of social interactions are changing simultaneously. To keep up with such a hectic pace of development, people must have the strength to shatter and dissolve past elements, to condemn historical segments that discourage creativity. This "unhistorical" way of living might become more crucial as time passes. I am not



arguing that historical recording should be abolished entirely in the future. Instead, it genuinely seems important to take advantage of history while always being aware of its potential dangers.