

## EXCERPT FROM SIMA QIAN'S LETTER TO REN AN

### Introduction

Sima Qian (145?-86? BCE) was the son of Sima Tan (d. 110 BCE), Grand Historian to the court of Emperor Wu (r. 141-87 BCE) of the Han dynasty. At that time, the Grand Historian's tasks were mostly to track astronomical phenomena and to offer interpretations of them to the court. Sima Tan, apparently of his own accord, had taken on a project on the side: to write the history of the known world (which is to say, China and, to the extent that they had anything to do with China, neighboring peoples and kingdoms). Sima Tan did not get very far with his project before he died, exhorting his son, Sima Qian, to complete the task. So Sima Qian followed in his father's footsteps, serving Emperor Wu as Grand Historian and pursuing the historical project left to him by his father.

Life at court must have been fascinating. Emperor Wu was an activist ruler, pursuing innovative economic policies and engaging in aggressive wars of territorial expansion. His government monopolized trade in salt, iron, and alcoholic beverages to generate revenue for military expenses. His armies conquered territories from Korea to Central Asia. Foreign things interested Emperor Wu: horses and grapes from Central Asia, for example, and alfalfa (to feed the horses).

Most of Emperor Wu's military expeditions went well. Some did not. Once, the emperor sent General Li Ling to the north to fight the Xiongnu nomads with only 5,000 infantry. The idea was to lure the Xiongnu closer, then send in reinforcements and wipe them out. The "luring" part worked, but Li Ling was surrounded. The emperor did not send reinforcements, Li Ling's soldiers were slaughtered, and Li Ling surrendered. Later, reports of questionable reliability reached the emperor that Li Ling was training the Xiongnu in the arts of war. Naturally, Emperor Wu ordered that all Li Ling's family members be killed and sentenced Li himself to death *in absentia*.

Though he was not a close friend of Li Ling, Sima Qian spoke out in defense of the captured general. Emperor Wu was unhappy, and sentenced Sima Qian to death. As a high-ranking official, Sima had a choice: accept the death penalty or submit to castration instead. Castration being both painful and humiliating, most men would have simply committed suicide. Sima Qian, however, felt an obligation to his father and to the historical project on which he had embarked: he simply had to finish it. Therefore, the Grand Historian chose to live with the humiliation of being a eunuch in order to be able to complete his book. The document below is an excerpt from a letter from Sima Qian to his friend, Ren An, in which he explains his decision.

### Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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### *Excerpt from Sima Qian's Letter to Ren An*

My father had no great deeds that entitled him to receive territories or privileges from the emperor. He dealt with affairs of astronomy and the calendar, which are close to divination and

the worship of the spirits. He was kept for the sport and amusement of the emperor, treated the same as the musicians and jesters, and made light of by the vulgar men of his day. If I fell before the law and were executed, it would make no more difference to most people than one hair off nine oxen, for I was nothing but a mere ant to them.

**Questions:**

1. How does Sima Qian describe life as an official?
2. What does this passage indicate about the emperor?



A man has only one death. That death may be as weighty as Mount Tai, or it may be as light as a goose feather. It all depends upon the way he uses it. ... It is the nature of every man to love life and hate death, to think of his relatives and look after his wife and children. Only when a man is moved by higher principles is this not so. Then there are things that he must do. ... The brave man does not always die for honor, while even the coward may fulfill his duty. Each takes a different way to exert himself. Though I might be weak and cowardly and seek shamefully 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 scullery 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, dwelling among this filth, is that I grieve that I have things in my heart that 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.

**Questions:**

3. What reason does the author give for submitting to castration, rather than committing suicide?
4. What does this indicate about the author?



Too numerous to record are the men of ancient times who were rich and noble and whose names have yet vanished away. It is only those who were masterful and sure, the truly extraordinary men, who are still remembered. When the Earl of the West was imprisoned at Youli, he expanded the *Changes*; Confucius was in distress and he made the *Spring and Autumn Annals*; Qu Yuan was banished and he composed his poem "Encountering Sorrow"; after Zuo Qiu lost his sight he composed the *Narratives of the States*; when Sunzi had had his feet amputated he set forth the *Art of War*; Lü Buwei was banished to Shu but his *Lülan* (*Lüshi chunqiu*) has been handed down through the ages; while Han Feizi was held prisoner in Qin he wrote "The Difficulties of Disputation" and "The Sorrow of Standing Alone"; most of the three hundred poems of the *Book of Odes* were written when the sages poured forth their anger and dissatisfaction. All these men had a rankling in their hearts, for they were not able to

accomplish what they wished. Therefore they wrote of past affairs in order to pass on their thoughts to future generations. ...

**Questions:**

5. According to the author, what seems to be the major impetus for great writing?
6. Does the author's point of view on the circumstances under which great writing is produced hold true for other eras and other places? For today?

**Longer Selection**

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My father had no great deeds that entitled him to receive territories or privileges from the emperor. He dealt with affairs of astronomy and the calendar, which are close to divination and the worship of the spirits. He was kept for the sport and amusement of the emperor, treated the same as the musicians and jesters, and made light of by the vulgar men of his day. If I fell before the law and were executed, it would make no more difference to most people than one hair off nine oxen, for I was nothing but a mere ant to them. The world would not rank me among those men who were able to die for their ideals, but would believe simply that my wisdom was exhausted and my crime great, that I had been unable to escape penalty and in the end had gone to my death. Why? Because all my past actions had brought this on me, they would say.

A man has only one death. That death may be as weighty as Mount Tai, or it may be as light as a goose feather. It all depends upon the way he uses it. ... It is the nature of every man to love life and hate death, to think of his relatives and look after his wife and children. Only when a man is moved by higher principles is this not so. Then there are things that he must do. ... The brave man does not always die for honor, while even the coward may fulfill his duty. Each takes a different way to exert himself. Though I might be weak and cowardly and seek shamefully 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 scullery 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, dwelling among this filth, is that I grieve that I have things in my heart that 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.

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I too have ventured not to be modest but have entrusted myself to my useless writings. I have gathered up and brought together the old traditions of the world that were scattered and lost. I have examined the deeds and events of the past and investigated the principles behind their success and failure, their rise and decay, in 130 chapters. I wished to examine into all that concerns Heaven and the human, to penetrate the changes of the past and present, completing all as the work of one family. But before I had finished my rough manuscript, I met with this calamity. It is because I regretted that it had not been completed that I submitted to the extreme penalty without rancor. When I have truly completed this work, I shall deposit it in some safe place. If it may be handed down to men who will appreciate it and penetrate to the villages and great cities, then, though I should suffer a thousand mutilations, what regret would I have?