

Re-examination of the Pre-Qin History of the Records of the Historian and Sima Qian's View of Historiography from the Archaeological Perspective

Anna Wu*

School of Arts and Sciences, University of San Francisco ,2130 Fulton St, San Francisco, 94117
E-mail: anna200671@hotmail.com

Abstract:

In recent years, the remarkable development of archaeology, especially the excavation and publication of pre-Qin and Qin-Han documents, has provided new materials and opportunities for the study of ancient history and deepened the understanding of the Records of the Historian. Comparison of the excavated materials and the contents of the Records of the Historian reveals mutual corroboration, as well as discrepancies and doubts, prompting the academic community to reassess the research results of pre-Qin history and the academic history of the Records of the Historian. This article focuses on the pre-Qin part of the Records of the Historian, combining literature and archaeological data to explore its authenticity, and comparing the records of the Historian with the excavated data to discuss the origin of the Qin people, the harsh system and the death of the Qin, etc. The author also analyzes the life of Sima Qian and his academic and political environment, aiming to comprehensively re-conceptualize the history of the pre-Qin period and the scholarly value of the Records of the Historian and Sima Qian.

Keywords: Records of the Historian; Pre-Qin History; Sima Qian's View of History; Archaeology

1. Introduction

"Records of the Historian," a monumental work crafted with utmost dedication by the eminent historian Sima Qian during the Western Han Dynasty, enjoys the reputation of being "the supreme masterpiece among historians' works and the rhymeless Lament of Qu Yuan." Since its inception, it has stood atop the pinnacle of ancient Chinese historiography with its distinctive artistic charm and profound historical impact, forming an insurmountable monument. This tome not only meticulously chronicles about three thousand years of Chinese history from ancient times to the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, but also constitutes an immortal classic integrating the essence of history, literature, and philosophy, fully demonstrating Sima Qian's profound historical insight, remarkable literary proficiency, and exceptional compilation skills. The narrative structure of "Records of the Historian" serves as a paradigm for ancient historical compilation. The book is ingeniously divided into five major systems: the Twelve Annals, Thirty Biographies of Hereditary Houses, Seventy Biographies, Ten Tables, and Eight Treatises, which intertwine to form a logically rigorous and

structurally complete organic whole. The Annals trace the historical trajectory of the political evolution of the Chinese nation centered on emperors; the Biographies of Hereditary Houses focus on the rise and fall of feudal states, reflecting the political landscape of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods; the Seventy Biographies extensively cover elite figures from all walks of life, ranging from political leaders and military commanders to intellectual giants, literary titans, and even occult practitioners, meticulously portraying vivid eral portraits. This character-centric narrative mode, with time as its warp and weft, not only brings historical events to life but also imbues historical figures with vitality, making them leap off the pages and remain fresh through the ages.

Archaeological materials, as an indispensable cornerstone in the discipline of history, are vital in providing an empirical basis independent of documentary records. They are unparalleled in verifying the authenticity and completeness of ancient literature and compensating for its limitations. These tangible relics, such as pottery, bronze vessels, jade artifacts, bone carvings, bamboo slips, tomb structures, and even site layouts, not only visually exhibit ancient humans' practices in production technology, life-

style, and living environment but also profoundly reveal their cultural concepts, religious beliefs, social systems, and interpersonal relationships, painting vivid and detailed historical landscapes for later scholars.

Crucially, combining archaeological materials with “Records of the Historian,” a classic document in pre-Qin history research, for interdisciplinary and multidimensional comparative analysis not only helps calibrate historical event timelines more precisely, restoring authentic historical scenes but also delves into Sima Qian’s historical concepts, methodological principles, and unique perceptions and evaluations of pre-Qin history during his compilation. Despite Sima Qian’s efforts to collect various documents available at the time, limitations of the era and document sources inevitably led to omissions and inaccuracies in his records. The introduction of archaeological materials offers an effective avenue to examine and rectify these records, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of Sima Qian’s historical thoughts and their impact on subsequent historiography.

Hence, integrating archaeological materials with the pre-Qin history recorded in “Records of the Historian” for mutual verification and supplementation represents a significant innovation in historical research methodology and a necessary path to advance pre-Qin history studies in depth. This process not only enhances the accuracy and scientific rigor of historical research by grasping a more precise panoramic view and truth of pre-Qin history but also facilitates the profound exploration of the profound heritage of Chinese civilization, preserving and promoting the excellent historical and cultural traditions of the Chinese nation.

This article aims to explore the intrinsic connections and interactions between archaeological materials and the pre-Qin history recorded in “Records of the Historian.” On the one hand, it verifies the accuracy and reliability of the pre-Qin historical facts in “Records of the Historian”; on the other hand, it deeply analyzes Sima Qian’s historical concepts and his profound insights into and unique contributions to pre-Qin history from the unique perspective of archaeological materials. Additionally, by reassessing Sima Qian and his historical context through archaeological materials, this study endeavors to reveal more comprehensively, objectively, and profoundly the significant role and profound influence of “Records of the Historian” and its author in the history of Chinese and even world historiography. This is not only a manifestation of historical heritage and respect but also a lofty tribute and profound remembrance of Sima Qian, this great historian’s outstanding contributions.

2. Archaeological Materials as Evidence for the Pre-Qin Historical Facts in Records of the Historian

In the ancient times when the floods were raging, the unprecedented scale of the floods seriously disrupted the daily life of the ancestors, forcing the whole society to unite as a consensus, and regarded the quelling of the floods as an urgent task. Records of the Historian, a historical masterpiece, recorded in detail that many leaders, including Jiu Ji, Yu, Yi, Hou Ji, etc., stepped forward to join the great cause of flood control. What is worth noting is that the ancestors of Qin people also showed extraordinary courage and commitment in this context, and joined in the water treatment with determination.

In the Records of the Historian, Sima Qian’s exhaustive discussion of the Qin dynasty demonstrates his remarkable insight as an outstanding scholar of history and his profound distillation of past experience. Through the ingenious establishment of the two core chapters of the Qin Benji and the Qin Shi Huang Benji, he not only systematically traces the Qin people’s magnificent journey from living in a remote area to sweeping across the six kingdoms and uniting the whole world, but also deeply analyzes the policies implemented during the reign of the Qin Emperor and their far-reaching effects, and especially explores the inner logic of the Qin Dynasty’s sudden collapse. As a comprehensive record of the historical evolution of the Qin race, the Qin Chronicle depicts in detail how the Qin Dynasty emerged from a small and marginalized state to achieve a thousand years of supremacy through political innovation, military expansion, and cultural fusion. It outlines the multidimensional changes and brilliant achievements of the Qin state in terms of political system, military strategy, and cultural ideology. In the “Qin Shi Huang Ben Ji” (The Chronicle of the First Emperor of Qin), the strokes of the book are more focused on Qin Shi Huang’s personal life and the changes of his ruling era. Sima Qian not only highly affirms the outstanding contributions of Qin Shi Huang in ending the disputes among the Warring States, creating a great unification, and building a centralized system of power, but also coldly reveals the shortcomings of his rule, such as tyranny, draconian laws, and heavy labor, which were the root causes of the people’s grievances and social unrest, and ultimately led to the short-lived demise of the Qin Dynasty.

In the field of pre-Qin history, which is full of challenges and mysteries, the discovery and interpretation of archaeological materials are especially crucial. Because the pre-Qin period is so long ago, the documentary records are often scattered and incomplete, and there are

many differences and ambiguities in interpretation, which makes archaeological discoveries an important window to explore the truth of the history of this period. Through archaeological excavations, the material and cultural aspects of ancient society can be directly observed, such as the evolution of agricultural tools, the development of handicrafts technology, the formation and change of cities and settlements, etc. These physical evidences can often reveal historical details that have not been touched upon in the literature or are unknown, which greatly expands the understanding of the complexity and diversity of the pre-Qin society.

2.1 The Verification between the Origin of Qin People and Archaeological Data

According to the Records of the Grand Historian's Qin Benji:

The ancestors of Qin were descendants of Emperor Zhuanxu, with a descendant named Nv Xiu. ... Da Fei received the honor and assisted Shun in taming birds and beasts, which mostly became obedient. He was known as Bo Yi, and Shun granted him the surname of Ying.^[1]

This surname later became the origin of the alternative name "Qin Ying" for Qin people and descendants, deeply reflecting the profound influence of Qin ancestors' achievements in flood control.

Qin, as a unique nation in the long river of history, exhibits remarkable continuity and vitality in its cultural lineage. Originating from the descendants of ancient Emperor Zhuanxu, it survived the transitions of Shang and Zhou dynasties, ultimately achieving the annexation of feudal lords and unifying the entire realm. When Sima Qian compiled the Records of the Grand Historian, he attached great importance to Qin's history, dedicating two separate chapters within the Twelve Honored Histories to detailing Qin's rise and fall. This not only demonstrates his profound understanding of the historical value of previous dynasties but also reflects his deep concern for the fate of the Han Dynasty that succeeded Qin.

Given the proximity of Qin to the Western Han Dynasty during which Sima Qian lived, coupled with the relative abundance of materials at that time, favorable conditions were provided for Sima Qian to comprehensively and thoroughly write about Qin's history. However, with the rapid development of archaeology in recent years, the excavation of numerous bamboo slips and documents, such as the Shuihudi Qin Bamboo Slips, Tianshui Fangmatan Qin Bamboo Slips, and the bamboo slips from Yiyang Rabbit Hill in Hunan, has provided invaluable physical evidence for reassessing the Records of the Grand Historian's accounts of Qin. Through comparative studies, it is

not difficult to uncover omissions and inaccuracies, which not only enrich our understanding of Qin's history but also prompt timely supplements and revisions to existing historical records to ensure the accuracy and completeness of historical inheritance.

Sima Qian's narrative in the Qin Benji of the Records of the Grand Historian presents a phenomenon of "discontinuity" regarding Qin people's origins, mainly manifested in his detailed depiction starting from the generation of "Zhong Yu":

Zhong Jué, the great-great-grandson, lived in the western regions, guarding the western border. He gave birth to Feilian, who in turn gave birth to Elai. Elai was powerful, while Feilian was swift; both served Yin Zhou with their talents. When King Wu of Zhou attacked Yin Zhou, he killed Elai as well. At that time, Feilian was sent to the north for Yin Zhou's affairs, but upon returning, he found no way to report. He built an altar on Mount Tai and reported, obtaining a stone coffin inscribed, "The Emperor has ordered Chuqu not to participate in Yin's rebellion; I grant you a stone coffin in Huashi." After his death, he was buried on Mount Tai.^[2]

Based on the Records of the Grand Historian's narrative, Qin's origins seem anchored in the western region, led by the chieftain Zhong Yu, who bore the responsibility of "guarding the western border." However, with the deaths of Feilian and Elai, the traces of the Qin tribe temporarily disappeared from historical records until Fei Zi's tenure as a horse breeder for the Zhou royal family at Quanqiu, where Qin people's living area was once again clearly recorded in history. Quanqiu, as an important early stronghold of Qin people, has been confirmed by archaeological sites to be located in the area of Dabaozi Mountain, Yongxing Township in the southwest of Tianshui City, Gansu Province, and Changdao Township in the northeast of Xihe County, providing valuable physical materials for studying the early history of Qin people.^[3]

Regarding Qin people's migration routes and residences before settling in Quanqiu, due to the lack of records in the Records of the Grand Historian, it remains an unsolved mystery. This historical gap has sparked widespread discussions and debates among later scholars on the origin of Qin people, resulting in various academic viewpoints, including the "Eastern Origin Theory," "Western Origin Theory," "Northern Origin Theory," and the "Dual-Origin Theory." Among them, the "Eastern Origin Theory" advocates that Qin people originated in the east and gradually migrated westward,^[4] while the "Western Origin Theory" holds that Qin people developed in the western region throughout.^[5] Both positions have their theoretical sup-

port and evidence base, albeit from opposing standpoints. Discussions on the origin of the Qin people have long been confined to diversified interpretations of existing literature, and although these analyses have been characterized by a wide range of opinions, it is often difficult to forge an irrefutable consensus. In order to deeply explore this historical puzzle, it is necessary to integrate emerging archaeological discoveries as supporting evidence. The publication of Qinghua Jane is like a key to unlocking this long-standing puzzle, providing solid and persuasive evidence. Combining ancient texts with the latest archaeological data, it can be deduced with certainty that the ancestors of the Qin people moved westward from the land of "Shanggai", i.e., the area around the city of Qufu in present-day Shandong Province, and eventually settled in the area of Zhuwushan, Gangu County, Tianshui City, Gansu Province. This discovery, undoubtedly for the Records of the Historian about the origin of the Qin people in the unfinished business to fill an important gap. The publication of the Qinghua Jane marks the remarkable achievement of the Center for the Study and Conservation of Unearthed Documents at Tsinghua University, led by Professor Li Xueqin, in rescuing and organizing this precious batch of Ch'u Jane, which was lost overseas. Given the fact that these Chusan documents were once excavated, their preservation condition is worrying, and some of them even suffered further damage during the process of being brought back to China together with the soil. Fortunately, through the careful secondary archaeological and conservation work of experts, these valuable materials were able to see the light of day.

Particularly important is that in this batch of bamboo slips, the experts found an important historical book called "Department of the year", which records the historical events from the early Western Zhou Dynasty to the pre-War period, and compared with the Spring and Autumn Period and the traditional literature such as "Records of the Historian", it shows a lot of novel and unique value of the historical materials. Prof. Li Xueqin, when introducing the Qinghua Jane - Departmental Years, especially emphasized the richness and uniqueness of its content, which provides a completely new perspective for understanding history. It is worth noting that the Records of the Historian is missing the record of the migration path of the Qin people after the killing of Gailian, while the Qinghua Jane - Departmental Years clearly records the migration of the remnants of the Gailian people from the east to the west to the present day in Tianshui in the eastern part of Gansu Province, which not only fills in the gap in the historical record, but also provides key clues to a more comprehensive

understanding of the early history of the Qin people: *When King Cheng first invaded Shangyi, he killed Lu Zizheng and Fei (Lian) fled to the east to the Shangqa (Gai) clan. King Cheng invaded Shangqa (Gai), killed Fei (Lian), and moved the people of Shangqa (Gai) westward to a prison to defend themselves against Nu Lu's Cheng, who was the ancestor of Qin.*^[6]

Qinghua Jane - Department of the contents of the year, not only with the "Spring and Autumn Annals", "Zuo Zhuan" and other classical literature to form a valuable corroboration of each other, but also unveiled a number of lesser-known chapters of history, for a series of long plagued by a series of major historical controversies in the academic community to provide a valuable source of information. Particularly noteworthy is that its detailed account of the Qin people's ancestors moving westward to Zhu Jiao (now recognized as Zhu Mou) directly fills the blank in the Records of the Historian in the exploration of the origin of the Qin people, and becomes a key key to unlocking the mystery of this history.

In the "Tsinghua Bamboo Slips: Annals," the name "Zhuyu" is explicitly incorporated for the first time into the trajectory of the Qin people's migration, aligning closely with the geographical description in "Shangshu: Yugong" regarding "Xiqing, Zhuyu, Niaoshu extending to Taihua." It has been confirmed that "yu" and "yu" are homophonous characters with the same meaning, thus pinpointing the location of Mount Zhuyu to the south of the ancient Jixian (presently Gangu County, Tianshui City, Gansu Province). This discovery not only resonates across eras with the ancient records in "Shangshu" but also receives robust support from modern archaeology, further validating the rationale for the Zhuyu region as an early and crucial area of Qin people's activities.

Hu Wei's fieldwork data, with its detailed descriptions and unique perspectives, have enriched Mount Zhuyu's geographical and cultural landscapes. He noted that this mountain is situated in the southwest of Fuqiang County (today's Gangu County), boasting unique geological features and a stele relic inscribed with "Yu's Establishment at Zhuyu," manifesting its profound historical and cultural significance. Additionally, the establishment of Jixian during the reign of Qin Wugong and the discovery of Qin pottery inscriptions mentioning "Jikou" and "Jizhi" in Licun, Lintong, reinforce the historical status of Jixian (i.e., the Zhuyu region) as the core of the Qin people's early activities from various angles.

In terms of documentary records, the different expressions of "Shanghe" in "Mawangdui Horizontal and Vertical Statesman Letters" and "Mozi," despite their graphical

differences, essentially refer to the same location—Shanggai (or Shangyan). This finding corroborates with clues in the “Tsinghua Bamboo Slips” about the Qin people’s origin, jointly outlining a clear historical picture of their migration from east to west, from Shanggai to Zhuyu. Significant discoveries in archaeology, particularly the excavation of a series of early Qin cultural sites around Mount Zhuyu, such as the Maojiaping Site, with its abundant historical relics intimately linked to the early life of the Qin people, provide solid material evidence for the Qin people’s westward migration. The Maojiaping Site dates back to the early Western Zhou Dynasty, which aligns closely with the migration timeline recorded in the “Tsinghua Bamboo Slips: Annals,” thereby reinforcing the historical argument that the Zhuyu region served as an important early settlement for the Qin people.

2.2 The Grim and Cool Laws of the Qin Dynasty in the Records of the Historian and the Corroboration of Historical Sources

In the *Records of the Historian*, Sima Qian skillfully quoted Jia Yi’s “Discourse on Exceeding the Qin Dynasty”, which not only demonstrated his profound reflection on the rise and fall of the Qin Dynasty, but also expressed his deep understanding of the lessons of history and his earnest hope for the rulers of the current dynasty by borrowing from the past as a metaphor for the present. With his unique perspective, *The Essay on Exceeding the Qin Dynasty* deeply analyzes the inner reasons for the decline of the Qin Dynasty and reaffirms the iron law of history that “the public sentiment determines the rise and fall of a regime”, thus further strengthening Sima Qian’s understanding of and respect for the laws of history.

Sima Qian’s vivid account of Chen Sheng and Wu Guang’s revolt and the widespread response it triggered: *The youths of Shandong counties were bitter towards the Qin officials, and they all killed their guards and made the prime minister rebel against them in response to Chen Shui.*^[7]

This also reveals the sharp social conflicts and the vigorous rise of popular resistance at the end of the Qin Dynasty. However, the downfall of the Qin Dynasty was an intricate historical process, the root causes of which were deeply rooted in the intertwining influences of multiple factors. The immediate trigger was undoubtedly the nationwide armed revolts, which spread like wildfire and shook the foundations of the Qin dynasty. However, in order to understand the deeper reasons for the rapid collapse of the Qin dynasty, it is necessary to examine the shortcomings of its internal mechanisms.

Since Shang Yang’s change of law was put into practice in

Qin, the legalist ideology has firmly established its central position in national governance, and systematically constructed a relatively complete framework and system of rule of law, laying a solid institutional cornerstone for the rise and strength of the Qin state. The state policy of “cultivation and war” advocated by Shang Yang, as the core of Qin’s development strategy, was efficiently implemented through a detailed and well-organized legal system, which greatly contributed to the leap in agricultural productivity and the significant increase in military power.

However, the rule of the Qin Empire was also accompanied by strict control over the people and excessive economic exploitation. The construction of grandiose projects such as the Afang Palace and the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor not only cost the state a great deal of money, almost exhausting the state coffers, but also put an unbearable burden on the people. Although the policy of “cultivation and war” promoted people’s livelihood to a certain extent through policy support and guidance, it was also accompanied by a series of restrictive regulations, such as the “Law of the Field”:

“No one living in rural cottages shall dare to brew alcohol. The field overseer and his assistants shall strictly prohibit it, and those who disobey the order shall be punished.” And also, “In the second month of spring, no one is allowed to cut down trees in the mountains and forests or block up rivers and embankments.”^[8-9]

These strict Qin laws, such as the “ban on alcohol” and the “time limit”, as well as the extensive establishment of the royal forbidden gardens, deeply reflect the Qin Dynasty’s comprehensive and strict control over agricultural production and social life.

The rule of law system of the Qin Dynasty was characterized by heavy-handedness, the ideological roots of which were deeply rooted in the theories of Shang Yang and his legalists. In classic works such as the *Book of Merchants*, Shang Yang clearly articulated the concept of governance, which was that “if the punishment is light and the work is accomplished, the state will be strong”,^[10] and advocated the use of severe punishment to maintain social order and national tranquility. However, the extreme application of this philosophy in practice led to the extreme cruelty of law enforcement. Qin law not only provided for severe punishments such as capital murder, face tattooing, and palace punishment, but also filled the process of enforcement with bloodshed and violence.

The short reign of Qin II inspired later generations to analyze the reasons for the rapid death of the Qin dynasty. In his *Records of the Historian*, Sima Qian quoted Jia Yi’s “Discourse on the Excesses of the Qin Dynasty” and

severely criticized Qin's rule,^[11] pointing out that "the abolition of the king's way, the establishment of private power, the banning of documents, and the torture of the law" were the key factors accelerating Qin's downfall. This assertion profoundly reveals that the Qin rulers, in their pursuit of national strength and prosperity, neglected the fundamentals of people's well-being and social stability, which ultimately triggered strong discontent and resistance among the people and led to the rapid collapse of the regime. However, these tortures were not uniquely created by Qin in order to oppress the people:

In view of the historical facts of the time, many tortures were not necessarily initiated by Shang Yang, nor were they unique to Qin, or they were already in existence, or they existed in other countries at the same time.^[12]

When analyzing the dimension of "severe punishment and harsh laws" in the Qin legal system, the Sleeping Tiger Land Qin Slips, as a rare historical treasure, constructs an intuitive and conclusive historical picture with its exhaustive legal provisions. The detailed provisions of the Miscellaneous Transcriptions of the Qin Laws on the management of prisoners, especially the explicit record of "If a person works for the palace on the day of the city, he will be punished by a hundred floggings," reveal the Qin Dynasty's almost harsh expectations of the labor performance of the prisoners, and also maps out the harsh punitive mechanism behind it. This system, through the implementation of the principle of "the lowest performer is punished" and the imposition of heavy flogging on those who failed to meet the standard, vividly demonstrates the harshness and ruthlessness of the Qin law at the level of its enforcement, and profoundly embodies the harshness of the rule of law system of the Qin dynasty.

Sima Qian in the Records of the Historian put forward in the "abolition of the king's way, the establishment of private power, banning the documents and torture law", as an explanation of the reasons for the demise of the Qin dynasty, although inspiring, but on the "harsh and severe law" whether the end of the Qin directly triggered a general popular resistance and social unrest, still need to be carried out by academics. The question of whether the "harsh laws" directly triggered widespread popular resistance and social unrest at the end of the Qin dynasty still requires more in-depth and detailed discussion in the academic community. The answer to this question requires a comprehensive consideration of the interplay of multiple factors, such as the political ecology, economic model, and social structure of the Qin dynasty, as well as the complex evolution and impact of the legal system in the process of its actual implementation, so as to reveal

more comprehensively and profoundly the historical logic and deep-rooted reasons behind the rise and fall of the Qin dynasty.

In exploring the Qin law and its impact on the people's legal consciousness, it is indeed necessary to analyze various factors in depth. In particular, it is about the harshness of the Qin law, its acceptance by the people, and whether the principles of its establishment are in line with human nature. First of all, the Qin law was known for its harshness, which was to a large extent due to the need to maintain social order and strengthen the rule of the state. During the Warring States period, when countries were in constant strife and the social order was in turmoil, the Qin state, through a series of reforms, including Shang Yang's change of law, established a system of governance dominated by the Legalist ideology, aiming to ensure the stability and unity of the state through a strict legal system. Such strictness might indeed be difficult to be quickly accepted by the people in the initial period, especially for those people in the six states who were used to a more relaxed social environment. However, this did not mean that the principles of Qin law were completely against human nature. When dealing with issues of family ethics and social relations, such as blood relations and relations between friends and neighbors, the starting point of the Qin Law was to preserve these important interpersonal bonds. For example, the Qin Law adopts severe punitive measures against unfiliality and assaults on kinship elders, which actually emphasizes and upholds the importance of family ethics and social order. This starting point, based on the maintenance of social relations, was to some extent in line with the overall value orientation of the people.

The harshness of the Qin law was not static, but was adjusted with the changing times and social environment. After the unification of the six states by the Qin, in order to consolidate the rule and stabilize society, the Qin law may have been revised and improved to a certain extent, in order to adapt to the new social realities and the needs of the people.

2.3 The Fall of the Qin Dynasty in the Records of the Historian and the Corroboration of Historical Sources

Like a prairie fire, Chen Sheng and Wu Guang's uprising quickly ignited the resistance of the world's heroes and heroines, and many forces responded one after another, converging into an unstoppable anti-Qin torrent, which ultimately subverted the Qin Dynasty's thousand-year foundation, and turned the Qin Shi Huang's hope of "ten thousand lifetimes of foundations" into a bubble. In the Records of the Historian, Sima Qian included these two

heroes of the common people, who used to work in the fields, in the family list, which is undoubtedly a high evaluation and affirmation of Chen Sheng's historical achievement of raising the banner of righteousness and fighting against the Qin Dynasty.

Jia Yi's writing vividly depicts the magnificent scene of the people "*chopping wood for soldiers and unveiling poles for flags*" at the beginning of the uprising,^[13] a description that was later condensed into the idiom "unveiling poles and rising up", which has been passed down through the ages and has become a symbol of resistance to tyranny and the pursuit of freedom.

The Records of the Historian contains a particularly detailed and fascinating account of Chen Sheng and Wu Guang's uprising. Chen Sheng's bold words, "How can the sparrow know the will of the great swan?", not only demonstrated his lofty ambitions, but also deeply imprinted on the hearts of future generations. However, what prompted Chen Sheng to revolt in Dazhaxiang was not only his personal ambition, but also the desperate situation they were in at that time - a sudden downpour of rain blocked the way forward, making them face the cruel reality of "missing the deadline, the law will all be chopped off"! The situation was so desperate.

In the face of this desperate situation, Chen Sheng Wu Guang deeply realized that, whether it is fleeing or sitting on the sidelines, it is difficult to escape from death, the only way to revolt may find a chance of survival. Therefore, they carefully planned, through the divination, fish belly hiding books, pretending to be a fox song and other means, for the uprising to do all the preparations. Eventually, after persuading the people and killing the generals, they used the excuse of "*missing the deadline for heavy rain, and if you miss the deadline, you will be beheaded*"^[14] to stimulate the will of the people to revolt, and together they embarked on the road of revolt against the tyrannical rule of the Qin Dynasty.

However, it is worth noting that the lieutenant, who was the supervisor of the soldiers, was unusually silent or even unaware of such obvious rebellious behavior, which is indeed rather strange. Considering the strict regulation of officials by the Qin Laws, including the clear stipulations in terms of engineering tasks and managerial duties, as stated in the Miscellaneous Transcriptions of the Qin Laws, there were corresponding punishments for managers who failed to complete their tasks on time or who slightly violated or delayed them. This contrast makes the inaction of the lieutenants even more puzzling. Perhaps there is a more complex political and social background behind this. For example, the lieutenants might have been

dissatisfied with the harsh rule of the Qin dynasty and were acquiescent or even supportive of the uprising; or perhaps they failed to notice or were unable to prevent the outbreak of the uprising for various reasons. In any case, these unanswered questions add a bit of mystery to this period of history. From the Records of the Historian, it seems that the central government of the Qin Dynasty did not pay enough attention to the revolt, and even characterized it as a "rebellion of thieves", which could be solved by local officials pursuing and arresting them.^[15]

Chen Sheng and Wu Guang's revolts quickly provoked a wave of opposition to the Qin Dynasty and overthrew it. Sima Qian, in his Records of the Historian, highly praised its achievements. The revolt was triggered by extreme hardship, with Chen Sheng and others inspiring the revolt through planning, and the supervisors failing in their duties. At the beginning of the Qin Dynasty, the central government regarded the revolt as a "group of thieves", reflecting the crisis of the rule. Comparison of historical sources reveals that the term "delayed beheading" may be biased, suggesting that research needs to carefully consider a variety of factors. The core problem lies in the failure of Qin officials to supervise Chen Sheng and Wu Guang and their entourage. As supervisors, these officials were indifferent to the signs of a potentially serious rebellion, and failed to take any preventive measures or warning actions. Considering that under Qin law, participation in a rebellion, even if defined as a "group of thieves," was punishable by extremely severe penalties, the fact that those who knew about the amnesty for special cases of corvée labor under Qin law chose not to disclose it, but rather to harbor it and take the risk of participating in the rebellion, rather than handing Chen Sheng, Wu Guang, and the others over to the officials, constitutes a series of actions that can hardly be considered as a serious violation of the Qin law. This series of behaviors constitutes a point of contradiction that is difficult to directly explain and reasonably deduce.

By comparing the newly unearthed legal documents with the Records of the Historian, we can find that the statement that Chen Sheng and Wu Guang were "beheaded in accordance with the law for delaying the deadline" may have incorporated some of Sima Qian's personal insights or deviations in understanding. In light of this discovery, we believe that a more cautious attitude should be adopted when interpreting this historical event in depth, taking into full consideration a variety of historical materials and contextual factors, in order to restore the truth of the event in a more comprehensive manner.

3. Sima Qian's Historical Thought

from the Perspective of Archaeological Materials

3.1 Sima Qian's Historical Thought

Sima Qian's historiography was profound and far-reaching. He firmly believed in the truthfulness of history and emphasized that history books should faithfully record the past for the benefit of future generations. He regarded historiography as an independent discipline, and proposed scientific methods such as examination and falsification, which set a benchmark for historical research. Sima Qian's view of history contains a profound concept of evolution and development, and he believed that history is constantly moving forward, while revealing the philosophy of "when things flourish, they decline, and when times are extreme, they turn", which shows the inevitable law of historical development. He paid particular attention to the role of social and economic life in driving the historical process, and revealed the deep-seated motives behind history by analyzing social and economic changes in depth.

Looking at Sima Qian's historiography from the perspective of archaeological materials, we can find that he is not only a faithful recorder of historical events, but also an excavator of the deep meaning of history and a master of artistic presentation. Although archaeological materials, as direct or indirect evidence of history, do not directly involve Sima Qian's personal thoughts, the portrayal and interpretation of historical details in the *Records of the Historian* can indirectly reflect Sima Qian's historiographical concepts and methods of creation when utilizing (or assuming that he was able to utilize) archaeological materials (such as ancient relics, inscriptions, etc.).

Sima Qian's historical insight in the *Records of the Historian* reflects his ability to capture the deeper meanings behind archaeological materials (even though at that time he may have relied more on documents and legends). He not only records historical facts, but also analyzes the causes and patterns of historical events, as well as the characters and choices of historical figures through the traces of archaeological materials (or archaeological information implied in documents). For example, the portrayal of Xiang Yu in *Xiang Yu Ben Ji* may have drawn on the relics, legends or oral history about Xiang Yu circulating at that time, and through artistic processing, it shows the struggle and helplessness of individual heroism in the flood of history, and this kind of analysis beyond the surface is exactly the embodiment of Sima Qian's profound historical thought.^[16]

Sima Qian's literary talent makes the *Records of the Historian* a model of the combination of literature and

historiography. Using vivid language and rich literary techniques, he transformed archaeological materials (such as tomb layouts, artifact decorations, and other cultural information that might be indirectly reflected) into words, giving vivid life to historical figures and events. This creative approach not only enhanced the readability of the history books, but also reflected Sima Qian's ability to deeply understand and artistically reproduce the archaeological materials (or the cultural symbols they symbolize). He skillfully integrates the archaeological materials into the narrative, making the historical narrative more three-dimensional and vivid, so that the readers can enjoy the beauty of literature and at the same time feel the heaviness and depth of history.

The *Records of the Historian's* exhaustive record of pre-Qin history provides valuable information for later studies, which can be regarded to a large extent as Sima Qian's integration and re-creation of archaeological materials that might have existed at that time (such as ancient books, inscriptions, oral history, etc.). Through extensive collection, screening and integration, he constructed a relatively complete and systematic framework of pre-Qin history, which provided important historical background and clues for later generations of archaeologists. At the same time, Sima Qian's in-depth exploration of pre-Qin culture also promoted the research and interpretation of archaeological sites and relics of the pre-Qin period in later generations, and further explored the academic value and cultural significance of archaeological materials. As mentioned above, although Sima Qian failed to clarify the specific details of the origin of the Qin people, he highly praised the Fei Zi lineage of the ancestors of the Qin people, who eventually helped King Ping of Zhou to move to the east during the period of Duke Xiang of Qin, after going through many trials and tribulations. The *Records of the Historian's* account of "Duke Xiang then started the country" coincides with the Qinghua Jane's account of "Qin Zhongyan lived in the east of Zhou to guard Zhou's tomb, and Qin began to be big", and the two reflect each other, which not only confirms that during Duke Xiang's period, the Qin people were expanding eastward and stabilizing their base in Guanzhong. They not only corroborate each other's important historical node of Qin's eastward expansion and stabilization of its base in Guanzhong, but also celebrate the extraordinary achievements of Duke Xiang in leading Qin to break through the limitations of the western frontier and laying the cornerstone of its long-term development.

Looking at Sima Qian's historiography from the perspective of archaeological materials, we can find that he not

only possesses excellent historical insight and profound depth of thought, but also superior literary talent and a keen ability to perceive and utilize archaeological materials (or the cultural information they symbolize). These qualities together constitute the unique charm of Sima Qian's historiography, and set up a monumental model for the development of historiography and literature for future generations.

3.2 Reconceptualizing Sima Qian and His Times

Sima Qian, the outstanding historian honored as the "Sage of History" by later generations, was deeply imprinted by his life trajectory and academic achievements in the Western Han Dynasty, a great unified dynasty full of vitality after many vicissitudes of life. He was born in a family with deep cultural heritage, and his father, Sima Tan, as the Imperial Records of the Historian of the Han Dynasty, was not only in charge of recording and compiling the history of the country, but also a scholar with unique insights and profound research on history. Under the influence of his father's teachings, Sima Qian developed a strong interest in history and an endless yearning for it from a young age, and this love, like a seed, took root in his heart and eventually blossomed into a bright flower.

When discussing the history of the Qin Dynasty, the systematic omissions and errors in the Records of the Historian written by Sima Qian can no longer be covered by mere "doubt". This is not to criticize the ancients or discredit Sima Qian, but based on the pursuit of rigor in historical research, we should dig deeply into the historical materials with a calm mindset, and discuss them on the basis of facts. Historical writings often present the historian's subjective perspective of the "idea" or the reflection of historical phenomena, rather than the absolute objectivity of the "true history". In the face of the errors and deficiencies in the Records of the Historian, the key lies in whether contemporary scholars can acutely point them out and give reasonable explanations. Some of Sima Qian's accounts do give people a feeling of "black Qin and thick Han", which may be due to a variety of factors, such as the lack of information, personal stance, the limitations of the times, etc. However, in-depth analysis of Sima Qian's accounts, we can see that he is not a "true historian". However, after in-depth analysis of Sima Qian's family background, academic heritage, life pursuits and the political environment of his time, it is not difficult to find that these accounts may be more reflective of his attitude of writing history, "the intention is in the pen first, praise and blame are in it". Sima Qian's "rewriting" of the history of Qin in the Records of the Historian not only reflected his

deep reflection on the death of Qin, but also provided a historical mirror for the rise and development of the Han Dynasty. In this process, he perhaps intentionally or unintentionally lowered the image of the Qin dynasty in order to emphasize the superiority of the Han dynasty, and this tendency to "proclaim the Han dynasty" was highly in line with the mainstream ideology of the Han Dynasty during the reign of Emperor Wu. At the same time, the political wisdom contained in these records was undoubtedly of great practical value in consolidating the rule of the Han Dynasty.

During the Western Han Dynasty, the social atmosphere was open, and the ideological world presented a prosperous scene of a hundred schools of thought contending for supremacy. Confucianism's benevolence, righteousness and morality, Taoism's nature and inaction, and Legalism's severe punishment and law coexisted and collided and merged with each other, providing Sima Qian with a wealth of ideological resources and dimensions of thinking. He was able to freely absorb the strengths of various schools of thought and form his own unique view of history and values. The openness of this academic atmosphere undoubtedly laid a solid foundation for the birth of the Records of the Historian. With the emphasis on culture and the large-scale organization and restoration of literature in the early Han Dynasty, Sima Qian was able to access a wider range of historical resources. The ancient simplicity and depth of the Shangshu, the micro-phrases of the Spring and Autumn Annals, as well as the many ancient scrolls scattered in the folklore, all became important sources of history in his writing. In addition, Sima Qian also focus on fieldwork, footprints throughout the north and south of the Yangtze River, personally visit historical sites, and scholars from all over the exchange of consultation, these experiences make his Records of the Historian more vivid and specific, full of vivid vitality.

In the face of the prevalence of the "over-Qin" trend in the early Han Dynasty, Sima Qian showed insight and courage beyond his time. Instead of blindly following the trend, he calmly analyzed the historical contributions and limitations of the Qin Dynasty, gave a fair evaluation of its great achievement of unifying the six states, and at the same time pointed out the reasons for the tyranny and short life of the Qin Dynasty. This courage to break taboos and objectively evaluate history not only reflects Sima Qian's commitment and sense of responsibility as a historian, but also highlights his excellent historical wisdom and profound insight.

In the Records of the Historian, Sima Qian made a comprehensive and in-depth compilation and account of pre-

Qin history. He not only paid attention to the occurrence and development of historical events, but also focused on revealing the deep-seated reasons and laws behind them, as well as the evolution of human civilization. In chapters such as *The Chronicle of Qin*, he depicts the whole process of the Qin Dynasty from its rise to power to its downfall with delicate strokes, affirming the great achievement of Qin Shi Huang in unifying the six kingdoms and analyzing the root causes of the downfall of the Qin Dynasty. This deep insight and unique insight into history not only provides valuable reference for the study of pre-Qin history for future generations, but also has a far-reaching impact on the development of Chinese and even world historiography.

In the journey of studying Sima Qian and his monumental work *Records of the Historian*, the excavation of underground materials--simplified documents, archaeological remains, and the emergence of environmental archaeological information--has greatly broadened our research horizons, and given us unprecedented enlightenment and insights. The enduring value of the "twofold evidence method" advocated by Mr. Wang Guowei lies in the fact that it guides us to collect a wide range of materials, carry out multi-dimensional and cross-field interpretations, and closely integrate heirloom documents, unearthed documents, and archaeological data to corroborate and complement each other, so as to explore the mysteries of Sima Qian and the *Records of the Historian* in a deeper way, and to get closer to the truth of history, enriching our understanding of the history. This will enable us to explore the mysteries of Sima Qian and the *Historical Records* more deeply, get closer to the truth of history, and enrich our historical knowledge system.

As the ancient saying goes, "Rise high, drill hard." This article analyzes Sima Qian and his works in depth by selecting some chapters of the *Records of the Historian*. In Sima Qian's writing, there are both solid and vivid historical records, but there is also no lack of ambiguous omissions and even contradictions. It is gratifying to see that through the double verification of excavated documents and archaeological results, we can witness Sima Qian's accurate account of the historical facts of the pre-Qin period, such as Dayu; at the same time, we are also aware of certain deviations in his writing of Qin history. However, the key lies in that we should not only stick to the "right" and "wrong" of historical facts, but also deeply comprehend Sima Qian's far-reaching intention of portraying the ancient saintly and virtuous ruler, and explore the complex motives behind his "black Qin and thick Han". "behind the complex motives, but also need to cherish his efforts

to leave the *Records of the Historian*, a priceless cultural treasure, to fully understand the great achievements of Sima Qian and his writings.

Sima Qian's ideal of historiography - "picking up the queer, qi hundred miscellaneous language, hidden in the famous mountain, vice in the capital, once the future generations of saints and gentlemen" - has finally been realized. The *Records of the Historian* not only did not need to be hidden, but was widely praised and regarded as a classic by later generations. However, Sima Qian's profound insights and creative contributions to human nature, society and future generations were not immediately recognized by Emperor Wu of Han. He devoted his life to the pursuit of his own ideals, put forward a series of theories and ideas, the spirit of the respectable and marvelous, just as the old saying goes: "The ancient rich and famous Mo extinction, can not be remembered, only the suave and very people called it." Sima Qian, the suave and elegant historian, with his extraordinary talent and tenacity, forever engraved in the long river of history.

4. Conclusion

As first-hand historical evidence, archaeological materials play an irreplaceable role in verifying and supplementing the *Records of the Historian's* accounts of pre-Qin historical facts. First of all, archaeological discoveries, such as tombs, ruins, relics, etc., can directly reflect the material culture, lifestyle, and technological level of ancient societies, providing physical corroboration for the relevant descriptions in the *Records of the Historian* and enhancing its credibility and accuracy. For example, archaeological materials such as bronze inscriptions and documents can often reveal historical events, character relationships or social systems that are not recorded in detail in the *Records of the Historian*.

Secondly, archaeological materials can also supplement the historical details that may be missing or abbreviated in the *Records of the Historian*. Due to the dispersal of historical documents, errors in copying or preferences in recording, some important historical events or characters may not be fully presented in the *Records of the Historian*. Archaeological excavations may reveal these neglected historical fragments, providing valuable information for constructing a more complete and detailed picture of pre-Qin history.

Re-understanding Sima Qian and his *Records of the Historian* from the perspective of archaeological materials is an important way to deepen our understanding of pre-Qin history. On the one hand, it helps us to assess more comprehensively the value and limitations of the *Records*

of the Historian as a historical document, and to recognize its subjectivity and selectivity as a historical narrative. Through the verification and supplementation of archaeological materials, we can restore the historical truth more objectively and correct any misunderstanding or prejudice that may exist. On the other hand, from the perspective of archaeological materials, we can also gain a deeper understanding of Sima Qian's historiographical thoughts and methods. When compiling the Records of the Historian, Sima Qian was limited by the literature and cognitive level at that time, but the historical insight, literary talent, and profound grasp of the laws of history that he demonstrated are worthy of our in-depth study. Through the mutual corroboration of archaeological materials and documentary records, we can see more clearly Sima Qian's choices and creations in his historical narratives, and thus reveal the process of the formation and development of his historiographical thought.

References

- [1] *Records of the Grand Historian*. "The Reign of Qin Shihuang". Zhonghua Book Company, 1982. p. 223.
- [2] *Records of the Grand Historian*. "The Reign of Qin Shihuang". Zhonghua Book Company, 1982. p. 255.
- [3] Xu, R. H. (2000). *Agricultural civilization and the early capitals of Qin*. *Zhongguo Lishi Dixue Congkan (Chinese Historical Geography Series)*, 3, 57.
- [4] "Theory of the East and West Yi and Xia". (Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, 1934. p. 588.
- [5] *Collected Works of Guo Moruo*. Vol. 12. Zhonghua Book Company, 1959. p. 529.
- [6] *Tsinghua University Excavated Texts Research and Protection Center (Ed.), & Li, X. Q. (Ed.). (2011).*
- [7] *Shi Ji (Records of the Grand Historian)*. "Qin Shihuang Benji" (The Reign of Qin Shihuang). Zhonghua Book Company, 1982. p. 341.
- [8] *Hu Di Qinmu Zhujian (Bamboo slips from the Qin tombs at Hudi)*. Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe (Cultural Relics Publishing House), 1990. p. 52.
- [9] *Hu Di Qinmu Zhujian (Bamboo slips from the Qin tombs at Hudi)*. Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe (Cultural Relics Publishing House), 1990. p. 22.
- [10] *Shang Jun Shu Zhui Zhi (Commentary on the Book of Lord Shang)*. Vol. Qu Jiang (Removing Boundaries). Zhonghua Book Company, 2014. p. 32.
- [11] *Shi Ji (Records of the Grand Historian)*. "Qin Shihuang Benji" (The Reign of Qin Shihuang). Zhonghua Book Company, 1982. p. 356.
- [12] *Zhongguo Gudai Fazhi Shi Yanjiu (Research on the History of Ancient Chinese Legal System)*. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe (People's Publishing House), 1993. p. 135.
- [13] *Shi Ji (Records of the Grand Historian)*. "Qin Shihuang Benji" (The Reign of Qin Shihuang). Zhonghua Book Company, 1982. p. 355.
- [14] *Shi Ji (Records of the Grand Historian)*. "Chen She Shijia" (The Life of Chen She). Zhonghua Book Company, 1982. p. 2368.
- [15] *Shi Ji (Records of the Grand Historian)*. "Qin Shihuang Benji" (The Reign of Qin Shihuang). Zhonghua Book Company, 1982. p. 356. (Note: This is another duplicate reference.)
- [16] *Shi Ji (Records of the Grand Historian)*. "Xiang Yu Benji" (The Reign of Xiang Yu). Zhonghua Book Company, 1982. p. 392.