Sīmǎ Guāng
司马光

1019–1086—Statesman and historian; rival of Wang Anshi

Alternate name: style name: Jūnshí 君实; posthumous title: Duke of Wēn 温国公

Summary

Sima Guang was one of China's leading political figures and the author of *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government (Zizhi tongjian)*, a historical account of over a thousand years (403 BCE–959 CE) of China's early imperial past. Produced in the context of fierce disputes at the eleventh-century imperial court, *Zizhi tongjian*'s didactic message of how to maintain imperial power and ensure dynastic longevity helped to shape a belief in China's unbroken political tradition and contributed to the formation of a Chinese self-identity. He is often associated with his opposition to the reform proposals of his rival Wang Anshi.

Sima Guang lived almost a millennium ago, yet his name still resonates today for two reasons. First, he is seen as one of Chinese history's leading political figures. Much of his reputation has centered on one aspect of his career: the fierce factional dispute with his contemporary and rival *Wáng Ānshí 王安石 (1021–1086) between the late 1060s and the deaths of both men in 1086. When we hear about Sima Guang, it is often as a foil to Wang Anshi. He emerges from the comparison as a conservative statesman with a regressive influence on his times. But exclusive focus on one political rivalry, however explosive, mutes the range and richness of Sima Guang's thinking. We rarely hear of his early political experiences, though most of the policies that defined his opposition to Wang Anshi had already taken shape in the context of other debates. We should not underplay the importance of the political opposition between the two men, but neither should we let it obscure the ideological consistency of Sima Guang's overall career.

*People marked with an asterisk have entries in this dictionary.

Second, Sima Guang is known as author of *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* (*Zīzhì tōngjiàn* 资治通鉴), a keystone chronological account of over a thousand years of China's early imperial past. This work helped to shape later belief in China's integral, unbroken political tradition and, as a corollary, contributed to the formation of a Chinese self-identity. Against this politicized use of Sima Guang's work stand claims for its objectivity, which have dominated its reception from at least the fifteenth century. Yet Sima Guang's representation of China's past, though well-researched and written, was inevitably colored by the political and social environment of the eleventh century, and by his personal commitments. Once we restore *Zizhi tongjian* to the context of its composition and set it among the broader political activities of its author, it assumes a more complex function than much later scholarship suggests. Its force as a statement of political ideology, and not as a dispassionate account of the past, begins to emerge.

Early Life

Sima Guang was born on 17 November 1019 at the prefect's residence in Guangshan, modern Henan Province. He was named after his birthplace. He was the younger son of Sīmǎ Chí 司马池 (c. 980–1041), then prefect of the district, and Madame Niè 聶 (d. 1039); his brother, Sīmǎ Dàn 司马旦 (1006–1087), was older by thirteen years.

The Simas traced their ancestry back to Sīmǎ Fú 司马孚 (180–272 CE), an imperial prince and senior minister of Western Jìn 西晋 (265–316 CE). Geographically, that rooted them in Wen County, in modern Henan Province; Sima Guang received the posthumous title of Duke of Wēn 温国公. During Northern Wèi 北魏 (386–534 CE), the family moved northwest to Sushui village in Xia County, modern Shaanxi Province, when one of its members was buried there. That is where its family tomb remained during Sima Guang's lifetime, and where he was also buried. A collection of Sima Guang's jottings was later given the title *Records of Things Heard by* [*the Man from*] *Sushui* (*Sùshuǐ jì wén* 涑水记闻), reflecting a near-contemporary sense of his geographical identity.

By the Táng 唐 dynasty (618–907 CE) this branch of the Simas had fallen to the status of commoners. None of its members took office during the political fragmentation and social turmoil of the following Five Dynasties period 五代 (907–960 CE). It was Sima Guang's grandfather Sīmǎ Xuàn 司马炫 (fl. late tenth century), who obtained a prestigious *jìnshì* 进士 (presented scholar) degree by passing the metropolitan level of the newly revived civil service examinations. He eventually served as a county magistrate. Sima Guang's father, Sima Chi, also obtained office and reached the rank of prefect, which he held in six different regions. By the time of Sima Guang's

birth, the family had begun to establish itself in political circles.

Sima Guang's formal academic education began at the age of five under the tutelage of his father and elder brother. It centered on the rote learning and recitation of texts, not on a close understanding of their meaning. Sima Guang later claimed to have dedicated particular effort to these studies for fear of academic inferiority to his contemporaries. It was not until the age of twelve, he suggested, that he moved beyond recitation and started to contemplate the significance of the texts under study. Sima Guang's contemporary and biographer, *Sū Shì 苏轼 (1037–1101), tells us that already by the age of fourteen, Sima Guang had developed an impressive erudition and was skilled at composition. Recitation later formed an important part of his approach to education: "Books have to be recited completely from memory," he insisted. "Whether on horseback or unable to sleep in the middle of the night, your gains will be manifold if you recite texts and contemplate their significance" (Zhu 1929, 7A.2b). It even echoed in examination reforms that he advocated in 1086, at the end of his career.

In 1033 Sima Guang received his first official appointments through the hereditary privilege (*yìn* 荫) system to which his father's high rank entitled him. Five years later, at the relatively young age of nineteen, he earned an official post in his own right when he ranked top among the *jinshi* examination candidates of 1038. He transferred to the Ministry of Rites 礼部 as a result—an early introduction to the theme of ritual, which he revisited in later writings—and then to a post as an administrative assistant in a region close his native Xiazhou and also close to his father's posting at the time.

This early period was important to Sima Guang's later career in forging relations of friendship and political patronage. Two men connected to his father had a particular impact. The first was Páng Jí 庞籍 (988–1063), with whom Sima Chi had served in the late 1020s. Pang held the young Sima Guang in high esteem and seems to have treated him as a son both during childhood and in later life. There was also a long political collaboration between the two: Pang recommended Sima Guang to a position in an imperial academy, they headed the Ritual Academy together in the early 1050s, and Pang appointed Sima Guang as his aide when he became a regional prefect in 1054 and 1055.

The second association was with Zhāng Cún 张存 (984–1071). Zhang and Sima Chi had known each other ever since they had both obtained their *jinshi* degrees in 1005. Zhang gained high office as Minister of Rites. Sima Guang's relationship with him was mainly a personal one, though: in 1038 he married Zhang's fifteen-year old daughter. Although we hear little of Madame Zhang in Sima

Guang's story, their marriage lasted until her death on 2 March 1082.

The Political Context

Sima Guang was born into a Sòng 宋 state that had held nominal power for nearly sixty years. Its actual political control was fragile, though, and attempts to subjugate rival states continued after its foundation in 960 CE. This process of military and political annexation was paralleled by the growing consolidation of barbarian polities to the north of Song territory. Song's main threats were the Khitan (Qìdān 契丹) state of Liáo 辽 (916–1125) to the northeast, and the Tangut state of Xià 夏 (1032–1227) to the northwest.

In 979 Song suffered a heavy defeat to Liao. Despite this, a rhetoric of Chinese superiority endured: Song officials continued to represent their barbarian neighbors as culturally and morally inferior. But a new dynamic of relative barbarian military strength and Song weakness demanded a nuanced foreign policy, based on diplomatic treaties that implied at least equality between Song and its rivals. Further defeats by Liao after 979 CE forced Song into the Treaty of Chanyuan in 1004. It agreed to pay an annual subsidy in silks and silver. Song foreign policy for the remainder of the eleventh century was colored by the treaty.

Foreign relations influenced domestic agendas. The maintenance of a large standing army increased government expenditure: by 1064, according to a contemporary estimate, 60–70 percent of government revenue went to supporting active and retired troops. An expanding civilian bureaucracy also consumed a large proportion of fiscal revenue. One way to meet the cost of this expenditure was to develop interregional and international trade, which promised to open up new sources of tax revenue for the government. As a result, the state became more closely involved than before in a range of economic activities. Social problems resulted, though, and government revenues were insecure as a result.

A foreign threat, together with the development of forms of civilian governance at home, prompted intellectual introspection. There was a revival in canonical Confucian thought. Debates erupted over an appropriate framework for official culture, or *wén* 文. Some scholars, including the prominent statesman and intellectual *Ōuyáng Xiū 欧阳修 (1007–1072), championed a culture based on antiquity. They sought to establish canonical Confucian moral values that excluded foreign influences such as Buddhism. Others argued for a catholic, all-embracing definition of culture that could accommodate ideological developments since antiquity and could even incorporate external influences. Early Song rulers and ministers at first pursued syncretism as a basis for domestic unity. By the late 1030s and early 1040s and the time of

Sima Guang's emergence into public office, those in favor of the model of antiquity had started to gain ascendance.

The past loomed large over the eleventh century. If they were to ensure their own survival, Song emperors needed to learn the lessons of political fragmentation and regional militarization of late Tang and the Five Dynasties. There was therefore a tendency toward the centralization of political power in the hands of the ruler and, as a corollary, a reduction in the influence of senior ministers in the routine administration of government. There was also a proliferation of civilian over military forms of governance—the context for debates on official culture. The foreign military threat had a role to play here, too: Song emperors worried that it would enable local military commanders to increase their power and undermine the central court, as had happened from the mid-eighth century CE on. Successive generations of Song scholars and statesmen therefore concerned themselves with ways of making their state strong and efficient, better able to hold its own in an insecure political environment and to avoid the mistakes of the past. That, too, was Sima Guang's aim from early in his political career.

The Local Official

In 1039 Sima Chi was posted to the eastern coastal region of Hangzhou. Sima Guang requested a transfer to nearby Suzhou to be close to his father. Before he could take up his post, his mother died. Mourning freed him from official duties, and he joined his father in Hangzhou. While there, in 1040, he produced his first major political statement, opposing increases to government-managed civilian security forces in the region. This early rejection of popular conscription and militarization prefigured arguments that he produced throughout the rest of his career.

Sima Chi died in 1041, aged sixty-two. Sima Guang returned to his native Sushui to bury both of his parents at the family tomb and to observe a three-year period of mourning. In 1044 he resumed official duties as an administrative assistant in regional government. Again he used his time in local politics to produce essays on political themes that would take center stage in his later ideology: on checks and balances in government and on the need for talented and virtuous men in the official bureaucracy. These were theoretical in tone, unlike the practical policy statement of 1040, and the statements of a man trying to establish his public ideological identity.

Pang Ji played a central role in Sima Guang's career at this time. The two were in contact over official business in the winter of 1046 and 1047, after Sima Guang had returned the previous year to the capital at Kaifeng. In 1049 Pang Ji recommended Sima Guang for appointment as an imperial academician, with greater access to court politics and to the emperor. Sima Guang transferred through a series

of posts in various capital agencies as a result of this powerful patronage, including a move in 1052 to the Historiography Bureau.

In 1054 the professional relationship between the two men grew closer. Pang Ji appointed Sima Guang as a teaching aide when he became administrator of the northeastern region of Yunzhou. Later that year Sima Guang received a commission from the court to report on Pang Ji's work. In 1055, Sima Guang followed Pang Ji again to take up a post the northern borderland region of Bingzhou. While in Bingzhou, in 1057, Pang sent Sima Guang to resolve a local border dispute with Xia. Sima Guang submitted a plan to take advantage of perceived Xia military weakness by driving out Xia farmers from the area. Pang Ji adopted it despite contrary reports of a large enemy military presence. Song armies were ambushed as they moved into the disputed area; over a quarter of their troops perished. Pang Ji was demoted after an official investigation.

Though Sima Guang claimed personal responsibility for the defeat, he ultimately went unpunished. He left Bingzhou and transferred through a series of capital postings. By 1060 he had become supervisor of the Ministry of Revenue. It is tempting to trace his later economic concerns to this experience: he himself pointed up his post at the Ministry of Revenue in a long and involved discussion of state finances produced in the seventh lunar month of 1062.

Throughout the 1050s, Sima Guang issued statements on themes that would continue to concern him throughout his career. In late 1050 he worked on revisions to imperial sacrificial music, a topic that resulted in ongoing discussions with a colleague until the last years of his life. In 1051, from a post in the Ritual Academy, he issued essays on ritual protocols that included the granting of posthumous titles and funerary practices for the dead; this theme assumed a practical urgency in discussions surrounding Emperor Yingzong's succession during the mid-1060s. Also in 1051 Sima Guang turned to the theme of the employment of officials: he focused on the themes of talent (*cái* 才) and favoritism, central to his later discourse in court debate and in *Zizhi tongjian*. In 1057 he produced essays on the proper relationship between achievements and titles, and on knowing people—both extensions of the issue of official employment. And in 1058 he wrote on a related topic and one of the most pressing problems at court, which would engulf his own career over the following decade: factionalism.

Sima Guang's broader intellectual, as well as political, identity also took shape during the 1050s. In 1050 he requested the publication and dissemination of political and moral writings by *Xúnzǐ 荀子 (c. 312–c. 230 BCE) and *Yáng Xióng 杨雄 (53 BCE–18 CE), both of whom had "expanded orthodox methods" (Sima 1929a, 16.5a). Sima Guang later reversed his positive appraisal of

Xunzi, but Yang Xiong's thinking drew support throughout his career. In 1057 Sima Guang also produced a commentary on a version of the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiàojīng* 孝经). Here was yet another concept with which he engaged early in his career and then revisited later on, both explicitly in debates about the Song line of imperial succession during the early 1060s, and in more general terms as a principle for the foundations of government.

Despite the dramatic upward trajectory of his career and his prolific intellectual output in the capital, Sima Guang made three requests in 1059 for a transfer to a provincial posting near to his native Xiazhou; he offered as a reason his long absence from his home region. Contrary to characterizations of him as preoccupied with central government, in the first two decades of his career Sima Guang was sensible to local concerns: he occupied several local posts and, even when in the capital, pursued local postings. And it was while in local government that he produced many of his most important political statements of the period.

The Remonstrator

In the seventh lunar month of 1061 Sima Guang took up two posts that with hindsight assume particular significance. The first was that of imperial diarist. He received the appointment together with his future political rival, Wang Anshi. Its main task was to record the emperor's daily actions. Wang Anshi refused the commission; Sima Guang accepted after five refusals. The appointment hints at two aspects of Sima Guang's ideology at this stage of his career. First, in the fourth of his petitions declining the post, he drew a marked comparison between Wang Anshi and himself, with a focus on their respective literary abilities; a debate over the role of literary talent in government would become one of their ideological battlegrounds. Second, we have here a picture of Sima Guang as a developing historian: the Imperial Diary was classified in Song as a genre of historiography.

Sima Guang also took a post as joint head of the Remonstrance Bureau 谏院, an agency that offered critical comment on central government policy. He held the post for five years, an unusually long tenure. Even after a professional transfer to the prestigious Hanlin Academy in 1067, Sima Guang continued to address many of the themes that preoccupied him in the Remonstrance Bureau. They recurred, too, in his responses to Wang Anshi's policies, after the latter received control of government on 10 September 1068. A basic continuity therefore makes itself felt in Sima Guang's statements from the early and the late 1060s. After Wang Anshi came to power, though, Sima Guang gave his policies a new focus.

The Need for Remonstrance

The most basic issue that Sima Guang addressed as head of the Remonstrance

Bureau was the need for remonstrance itself. Early in 1064 he produced a statement on the importance of the Remonstrance Bureau's functions. Its officials were to concern themselves solely with matters of magnitude and urgency, not with the trivialities of daily administration. They were also to work in the state's interest, not their own: loyalty and frankness were key character traits. Later in the same year, on 13 September, Sima Guang issued a further statement in which he criticized contemporary failures to heed remonstrance. The result was a loss of popular faith in government.

Similar memorials flowed throughout the decade. All urged the court to enable open expression. By 1067 this was more vital than ever, Sima Guang argued: senior ministers' power had been restricted at the beginning of the dynasty, but since the reign of Emperor Rénzōng 仁宗 (r. 1022–1063) it had grown to excess; there was a danger was that it would encroach upon the ruler's authority. Sima Guang restated the same charge in a statement to the throne on 30 August 1069, this time with Wang Anshi's suppression of criticism against his policies as a particular target.

Imperial Responsibilities

Two of the early notices that Sima Guang submitted to the throne from the Remonstrance Bureau addressed the theme of emperorship. For Sima Guang, an emperor needed three fundamental qualities if he were to achieve success: humanity (*rén* 仁), clarity (*míng* 明), and decisiveness (*wǔ* 武). He also had three central duties: the employment of officials, the administration of rewards, and the application of punishments. This was the major business of state, which would create an efficient official bureaucracy and would serve the interests of the common people. Conversely, Sima Guang urged against the emperor's involvement in matters of routine governance. Such a division of political responsibility ran against the grain of early Song politics, in which emperors had devolved power upon themselves at the expense of their chief ministers. Sima Guang therefore met with opposition from his contemporaries and even, in 1069, from the emperor himself. Yet he repeated the same formulation, both with identical rhetoric and in different guises, to each emperor under whom he served.

Also early in his tenure at the Remonstrance Bureau, on 3 September 1061, Sima Guang presented to the throne a five-part guide to imperial success. After a sweeping review of the rises and falls of past dynasties, he concluded that the conduct of the emperor determined political longevity. Continuity and the transmission of tradition were essential here: emperors who kept their polities in good repair could preserve the legacy of their forebears and, in their turn, transmit it to their descendants. The five guidelines for imperial longevity had a more practical focus than the imperial character traits and duties that Sima

Guang had identified earlier: timely preparation for foreign invasion and domestic disasters, careful selection of military and civil officials, military training for troops, management of grain storage, and efficient local administration. Common to all was the maintenance of proper hierarchical relations between the constituent parts of the polity, and the need to ensure that everyone (including the emperor himself) fulfilled their allotted roles. Political and social harmony, which clear hierarchies ensured by removing competition, was essential if Song were to survive.

Employing Officials

Court officials were the emperor's main source of information about events in the empire, and it was therefore essential for imperial control to have a close familiarity with members of bureaucracy, their individual talents, and their personal sentiments. On 4 January 1064, on 8 October 1067, and again in the sixth lunar month of 1069, Sima Guang cast the employment of suitable men to appropriate offices as the root of order and disorder throughout the empire.

This came with a qualification. Sima Guang pointed up Emperor Shenzong's inappropriate involvement in the business of employment and demotion: he acted against senior ministers' advice, and he exposed himself to the machinations of those with private, factional interests as well as to recriminations from others who bore the brunt of imperial decisions. Sima Guang therefore insisted on a division between senior ministers' recommendations of individuals for employment, and the emperor's power to follow those recommendations. When appointed joint head of the Recruitment Section on 7 February 1063, and then head of the Recruitment Bureau and Personnel Evaluation Section in the late 1060s, Sima Guang supplemented his theoretical statements on this issue with practical influence over policy for employing officials.

The civil service examinations were the main tool in the eleventh century for selecting candidates for office. Throughout the 1060s, Sima Guang produced discussions on the selection of *jinshi* degree holders. In particular, he criticized the content of the present examinations and argued against the inclusion of questions on poetry and rhapsodies. He demanded that these literary elements give way to a focus on prose compositions, policy analysis, and classical texts. This emphasis on employing men with talent in practical governance later folded into an attack on Wang Anshi, whom Sima Guang criticized for promoting men of literary ability over those with moral integrity and talent. There was also a personal aspect to his criticisms: in 1067 he declared his own inability to produce compositions in parallel prose, a generic form associated with literary ornament and elaboration; in a letter to Wang Anshi on 10 April 1070, he again cast himself as the antithesis of a

literary man, coarse in his rhetoric but in tune with reality.

Ritual

Ritual took several forms for Sima Guang. First, it comprised the performative rituals of state, ancestral sacrifices, and funerals. For these, Sima Guang favored a definition of ritual (as part of a broader cultural sphere of *wen*) based on the prescriptions of antiquity, and in particular on canonical expectations of filial piety. In statements of the early 1060s he excluded from imperial ritual certain prevalent Buddhist and Daoist (Taoist) practices that, he claimed, fostered a conduct which was far removed from filial piety and so jeopardized the framework of traditional imperial authority. Second, ritual found expression in the social and political divisions of authority between superior and inferior, and especially between ruler and minister. Third, it was the observation of practices appropriate to the various roles that contributed to the larger social and political structure. We will hear more about the latter two types of ritual in what follows: for Sima Guang their collapse could endanger the state and, as he would show repeatedly in *Zizhi tongjian*, had actually done so in the past.

Filial ritual came to the fore of discussions at court after the death of Emperor Renzong on 30 April 1063, and with the succession of his adopted heir, Emperor Yīngzōng 英宗. Over the next three years, a tense debate erupted over the ritual status due to Emperor Yingzong's biological father. Sima Guang opposed senior statesmen of the time; he even differed with the emperor himself. Yingzong's legitimacy derived from status as Renzong's adopted son, Sima Guang argued, and any ambiguity in this status would weaken Yingzong's authority. Sima Guang therefore proposed that Yingzong's biological father should be referred to as an imperial uncle; the title of "imperial father" should be reserved for Renzong alone. These arguments fell on deaf ears. Yingzong ultimately accorded his biological father, not Renzong, the ritual title of imperial parent. Despite his defeat, Sima Guang had established a reputation for himself as a check against senior officials' monopolization of political authority, a role that he played in his opposition to Wang Anshi later in the decade.

Conscription and Military Service

Sima Guang's other political statements as a remonstrator during the 1060s revisited themes that he had already addressed earlier in his career. After the episode in Bingzhou in 1057, his foreign policy advocated a tolerant approach to dealing with barbarians and rejected the belligerent stance that he had once proposed to Pang Ji. The corollary to this was Sima Guang's opposition to a general increase in the militarization of Song society. He had already written on this

theme in Hangzhou in 1040. On 1 January 1065 he issued the first in a series of statements that demanded an end to policies for the conscription of civilian militia. Sima Guang offered two arguments to support his case. First, such a policy would precipitate military defeat because Song civilian conscripts were unprepared for conflict. Second, the conscription of local civilian militia would subvert the divide between military and civilian life that underpinned the machinery of the state. These arguments established a recognizable pattern and rhetoric for Sima Guang's statements, made between 1070 and 1073, against Wang Anshi's implementation of compulsory military service through local security groups.

Economic Policy

In seventh lunar month of 1062 Sima Guang submitted to the throne an extensive discussion of the Song state's economic resources. Again, he raised familiar arguments. He prioritized the selection of talented men to administer finances, and advocated employing them for long periods of time. He argued for setting aside part of any annual surplus in preparation for unexpected expenditure in future. With echoes of representations of his own frugality, he urged the reduction of institutional waste and official opulence.

Sima Guang opposed the interference of the state in the economic affairs of society. He proposed instead a laissez-faire economic policy, allowing the common people to enrich themselves without government deterrents or controls. For Sima Guang, government taxation should serve only to satisfy the minimal requirements for maintaining public order and no more. When Wang Anshi came to power, all this took on a sharp focus with Sima Guang's opposition to the so-called Green Shoots policy (*qīngmiáo fǎ* 青苗法) of state farming loans, as well as to the Hired Service system (*miǎnyì qián* 免役钱), a tax that enabled local administrators to hire personnel for services once covered by corvée labor. The effect of such policies, Sima Guang argued, was social hardship, poverty, and an increase in levels of crime. Families would be discouraged from working to support themselves, since they would anticipate the loss of their wealth to the government. Wang's policies also undermined the existing social distinctions between rich and poor, which Sima Guang saw as economically beneficial to society.

In a long statement of 24 August 1069, he opposed a further instrument of government intervention in regional economies—the use of commissioners, a practice that Wang Anshi had introduced in the fourth lunar month of that year. Commissioners rushed into local areas to solve their financial and other problems with little sense of local economic and social conditions, Sima Guang claimed. They disrupted local affairs by interfering with local officials' jobs and creating personal and professional

jealousies, but they brought little practical benefit. Hierarchies were again the issue here: the hierarchical divide between the demands of central government and the needs of local society. What was necessary for economic and social stability were competent men to observe those hierarchies, men like Sima Guang himself, in fact.

Historian of the Empire

On 1 November 1070, after numerous requests to be released from court duties, Sima Guang resigned from his post as an imperial academician. He left Kaifeng to become administrator of Yongxing Military Circuit, on the northwestern border with Xia. (A circuit was a historical administrative division similar to a prefecture.) While there, he made a number of statements on military affairs. The theme had preoccupied him during the 1060s, but now his opposition was underpinned by a close sense on the detrimental effects on local society. He also issued several strong statements against Wang Anshi's policies, especially the Green Shoots loans and the Hired Service taxes.

Sima Guang did not remain long in Yongxing. On 20 May 1071 he took up a sinecure in Song's second city, Luoyang. This in effect marked a withdrawal from the forefront of political life for the next fourteen years; only occasional statements made their way from Luoyang to the court at Kaifeng. Though Sima Guang was a prominent figure in local


資治通鑑卷第一
朝散大夫右諫議大夫權御史中丞充理檢使上護軍賜紫金魚袋臣司馬光奉
勑編集
周紀一 起著雍攝提格盡玄黓困敦凡三十五年
威烈王
二十三年初命晉大夫魏斯趙籍韓虔爲諸侯　臣光曰臣
聞天子之職莫大於禮禮莫大於分分莫大於名何謂禮紀綱
是也何謂分君臣是也何謂名公侯卿大夫是也夫以四海之
廣兆民之衆受制於一人雖有絶倫之力高世之智莫敢不奔
走而服役者豈非以禮爲之綱紀哉是故天子統三公三公率
諸侯諸侯制卿大夫卿大夫治士庶人貴以臨賤賤以承貴上
之使下猶心腹之運手足根本之制支葉下之事上猶手足之

A page from Sima Guang's *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government (Zizhi tongjian).*

society and maintained close social contacts with a community of retired statesmen, his writings at the time are shot through with the rhetoric of solitude and eremitism—rhetoric that had served historically as an expression of political discontent.

Sima Guang instead channeled his political energies in a different direction. He concerned himself with scholarly explications of a range of ritual matters, which favored inner moral self-cultivation over the conventional trappings of power

and social success. He also produced a ten-chapter table of Song's official bureaucracy, a three-chapter tabulated genealogy of the imperial house, a series of essays expressing ideological opposition to the classical thinker *Mencius 孟子 (c. 372–c. 289 BCE), a commentary on Yang Xiong's *Canon of Supreme Mystery* (*Tàixuánjīng* 太玄经), and in 1085 a further commentary on the *Classic of Filial Piety*. Above all, though, he worked on the composition of *Zizhi tongjian*. On 1 January 1085, he finally submitted to the throne that 294-chapter work. A thirty-chapter source-critical *Consideration of Variants* (*Kǎoyì* 考异) and a thirty-chapter *General Outline* (*Mùlù* 目录) accompanied the main text.

Development of the Text

By the time he left for Luoyang, Sima Guang had already laid the foundations for *Zizhi tongjian*'s composition. The project had first taken shape in discussions of the late 1050s and early 1060s between Sima Guang and scholar-official Liú Shù 刘恕, who later assisted with *Zizhi tongjian*'s composition. It bore its first fruit in 1064: Sima Guang presented to the throne *A Chart of Historical Years* (*Lìnián tú* 历年图). This was a chronological table in five chapters that, like the later *Zizhi tongjian*, covered events from 403 BCE to 959 CE.

In 1066, while the Normans were conquering England on the other side of the world, Sima Guang presented to the throne *Comprehensive Notes* (*Tōng zhì* 通志). This chronicle covered the period between 403 and 207 BCE; it later formed *Zizhi tongjian*'s first eight chapters. On 14 May of the same year, Emperor Yingzong issued his order for Sima Guang to compile "the traces of the business of rulers and ministers of past ages" (Li 1979–1995, 208.5050). A year later, at an imperial lecture on 18 November 1067, Sima Guang read an extract from his new work. The recently enthroned Emperor Shenzong accorded it an imperial preface and its present title. The emperor also granted Sima Guang the use of books from his former residence and allowed him access to the resources of the imperial library collections, he offered financial support for necessary equipment, and he consented to a request for assistants. The court reading of 1067 was the first in a series that took place during the late 1060s and early 1070s. Each produced discussions of contemporary political issues at court, and it is useful to see *Zizhi tongjian* in this context—as a form of political memorial to the throne. The next seventeen years were punctuated by a steady stream of readings from *Zizhi tongjian*'s early drafts at imperial seminars. As work on each chronological section of *Zizhi tongjian*'s account was finished, final versions were sent to the emperor.

The Function of Historiography

Emperor Shenzong's choice of title for Sima Guang's work was heavy with significance. Among its several implications, it suggested that Sima Guang's work

served as a "mirror" (*jiàn* 鉴). It used the past to reflect for the ruler on present political problems; it would thereby "aid government" (*zīzhì* 资治) and ensure the proper fulfillment of imperial functions. That is why it appeared in imperial seminars and in court debate. *Zizhi tongjian*'s didactic function was the product of a basic tenet of Chinese traditional historiography: works of history should inculcate moral and political lessons, and those lessons should emerge from the ways in which an author selected and organized his sources.

Sima Guang's thematic focus was expressly political; he was assiduous in meeting Emperor Yingzong's demand that he assemble "the traces of the business of rulers and ministers of past ages" (Li 1979–1995, 208.5050). He traced the fluctuating fortunes of the imperial institution. He was preoccupied with the major political figures of the past, individuals who had been responsible for making government function and who had exposed themselves to the processes of political unity and disunity and of dynastic rise and fall.

For Sima Guang, the political past taught a double-edged lesson. His ambivalent political vision was signaled by his choice of the starting date of 403 BCE for *Zizhi tongjian:* images of the political fragmentation and collapse of the great hereditary ruling house of the classical era, the house of Zhōu 周 (1045–256 BCE), greeted his readers, not descriptions of a strong and unified state. The same ambivalence received explicit expression in a phrase that appeared in statements on early drafts of *Zizhi tongjian* that Sima Guang produced during the 1060s. It culminated in the memorial that accompanied *Zizhi tongjian*'s presentation to the throne in 1084: "The good should be taken as models, the bad as warnings" (Sima Guang 1956, 9607; see also Sima Guang 1929a, 51.10b, 65.6b; Sima Guang 1929b, 16.86b; Li Tao 1979–1995, 208.5050).

Here was a familiar rhetoric of paired oppositions: Sima Guang echoed the celebrated antithetical coupling of "praise and blame" that had established itself in canonical texts as an ideal for representing the past; it was a common formulation at the time of *Zizhi tongjian*'s composition, too. In his rendering, as in the canonical precedent, Sima Guang accentuated the positive by placing it first. But while *Zizhi tongjian* offered examples of how rulers got things right in the past, it also supplied rich evidence of how far wrong individual emperors could go. Sima Guang not only represented the strength of dynastic control but also its frailty: the imperial institution was seen to be in constant, fraught danger.

The good and the bad of the past might reflect larger moral and political processes, but they were also shaped in their specific representation by historians' personal values. Here was another well-established tenet for historiography by Sima Guang's time. At least since Mencius in the fourth and third centuries

BCE, the function of historiography was not just to narrate what had happened but also to suggest what it meant. An omission might therefore resonate with ideological import; the phrasing of the text bristled with implication.

With these expectations hanging over him, Sima Guang was at pains to detail the meticulous process by which he had selected his sources for *Zizhi tongjian*. He did this through a text-critical commentary—the *Consideration of Variants*—which accompanied his main text. *Zizhi tongjian*'s ideological authority was at stake. Sima Guang's version of the past established itself as having been founded on the most rigorous standards of documentation: he had taken into account all available evidence. His *Consideration of Variants* therefore strengthened the claims of *Zizhi tongjian*'s main text by implying a process of careful objective judgment. But it also revealed the inherent subjectivity of the text's composition. As *Zizhi tongjian*'s historian and editor, Sima Guang first decided what material should inform his emperor in making political judgments, and then determined with what ideological slant that material should appear. The *Consideration of Variants* commentary showed the reasons why certain sources had been selected for inclusion, and what changes had been made to them. Sima Guang associated himself through citation with certain traditions of historical writing and, as a corollary, rejected rival traditions. He also claimed unique personal insights into the events that he recounted through personal interjections into his account in the explicit voice of historian. In the terminology of today, he placed his own spin on the past, and that was acknowledged in the eleventh century as the fulfillment of a canonical mode of historical writing.

Dynastic Rise and Fall

Zizhi tongjian's didactic message—its representation of the ways to maintain imperial power and to ensure dynastic longevity—resonated closely with the political agenda that Sima Guang set out in his memorials and statements of the 1050s and 1060s, the period of the work's conception and early development. At its heart was the need for clearly defined hierarchies in political and social rituals and relationships. That was what occupied the opening statement that Sima Guang made in the text in his own voice as *Zizhi tongjian*'s historian. He put it like this: "I, your minister, have heard that none of the duties of the Son of Heaven is greater than ritual; that in ritual nothing is greater than the division of roles; and that in divisions nothing is greater than titles" (Sima Guang 1956, 1.2). That, too, was the dominant theme that underpinned *Zizhi tongjian*'s account of the past. It made itself felt in a range of different contexts: the importance of strong titular and functional distinctions between the roles of rulers and ministers, and between different institutions within imperial government; the need for clearly defined relationships between

civil and military governance; the necessity of divides between Chinese and barbarians in foreign policy; the importance of preserving distinctions between the secular and the religious; and so on. Those rulers who in the past had managed to secure such ritual hierarchies emerged from *Zizhi tongjian* as effective administrators and were usually seen to have achieved political stability and longevity; those who had neglected the importance of these fundamental political and social divisions had faced personal demise, had damaged the common weal, and had jeopardized the security of the polities over which they ruled. In short, here was the pivot on which turned the dynamic of dynastic rise and fall, and the thematic basis of *Zizhi tongjian*'s composition. We are on familiar ground here: these were ideological commitments that have emerged already in our analysis of Sima Guang's early career and of his role as remonstrator.

The Senior Statesman

Shortly after *Zizhi tongjian*'s submission to the throne, Sima Guang at last received the imperial patronage that he had long sought. After a serious illness, Emperor Shenzong died on 1 April 1085. His heir, the nine-year old Emperor Zhézōng 哲宗 (r. 1086–1101), acceded to the throne under the regency of Emperor Yingzong's widow, Empress Dowager Gāo 高 (1032–1093). On 18 April Sima Guang received a communication from the Empress Dowager urging him to return to the capital to offer advice to the throne. We hear that Sima Guang received a rapturous welcome on his return to Kaifeng, in which commoners and officials alike beseeched him to remain and serve as chief minister of state. On 21 June the Empress Dowager appointed him as Vice Director of the Chancellery, second only to the chief minister.

As soon as he had attained a position of substantial power, Sima Guang pressed for a repeal of Wang Anshi's policies. On the day after his appointment as Vice Director of the Chancellery, he requested wholesale changes that moved beyond the piecemeal alterations made since Zhezong's accession. He argued that the only justification for Wang Anshi's policies had been Emperor Shenzong's desire to expand Song borders. Without such a desire for military conquest, he reasoned, there was little reason to retain Wang Anshi's political program. So soon after Shenzong's death this was daring stuff; political opponents objected that Sima Guang had failed to respect Shenzong's legacy. But it was consistent with Sima Guang's broader conception of the structures of imperial power: by attributing blame to Shenzong, he revisited the idea that the emperor must take ultimate responsibility for the common weal.

By the end of 1085, despite the continued presence in government of political opponents, Sima Guang had abolished most of Wang Anshi's policies. Four

major areas remained unaddressed, though. These formed the focus of Sima Guang's subsequent policies. They all revisited themes familiar from earlier in Sima Guang's political career: Hired Service taxes, the Green Shoots policy, ongoing military tensions with Xia, and the appointment of commander-officials. In the first lunar month of 1086 he claimed that "while these four scourges have yet to be eliminated, I shall not shut my eyes—even in death!" (Su Shi 1986, 16.490).

On 10 February 1086 Sima Guang requested the total abolition of Hired Service taxes and the restoration of an earlier system of corvée (i.e., conscripted) labor. He argued that Hired Service taxes harmed the livelihoods of both rich and poor, turned land-holding freemen into vagrants by causing farmers to lose their jobs, and bred negligence and corruption among local officials.

Sima Guang initially took a softer stance on Wang Anshi's Green Shoots policy. He proposed retaining the policy with the simple emendation that farmers be allowed to draw loans on a voluntary basis, rather than take the compulsory government loans that Wang Anshi had implemented. He was soon persuaded to abandon this moderate stance by colleagues such as Su Shi, who argued that even the availability of government loans would encourage farmers to spend beyond their means. On 16 September 1086, he therefore repealed the Green Shoots policy altogether and restored an earlier system of communal granaries.

Sima Guang attributed ongoing military tensions with Xia to Song belligerence and to the legacy of Wang Anshi's political program. On 19 February 1086 he submitted statements on Xia in which he advocated diplomacy over belligerence, requested an imperial pardon for Xia territorial encroachment in the past, and urged that cross-border trade between the two states be permitted. In the third lunar month of 1086 he submitted a further request to receive and console Xia immigrants to Song. In the seventh lunar month he proposed returning territory to Xia. These proposals initially met with opposition at court. When former chief minister Wén Yànbó 文彦博 (1006–1097) lent his support, though, they were finally implemented.

The one policy that Sima Guang ultimately failed to revoke was the appointment of commander-officials. These were men charged with providing training to local military units at a time when Emperor Shenzong had intended to launch a military campaign against Xia. Sima Guang claimed that they brought no benefit but, in stripping military control from regional administrators, they disrupted the institutional structures of local military. Despite falling short of a total repeal of Wang Anshi's policy, Sima Guang managed to modify it by returning military authority to local civil government.

These political measures were not entirely beneficial to the Song state. After

the abolition of Wang Anshi's policies, for example, government revenue shrank dramatically. Within several years, the surplus accumulated during the late 1060s and 1070s had almost vanished. The government was forced to borrow from the imperial treasury to cover deficits in its spending.

Many of the other statements that Sima Guang made in 1085 and 1086 also revisited themes that he had first developed during the 1060s and before. There are few new insights into his ideology to be gained from these later policies. Their interest instead lies in their consistency: they consolidate and confirm the vision that Sima Guang had developed over two decades earlier. Though there were familiar refrains from his political statements of the 1060s, we should also note that Sima Guang avoided ideological rigidity in his statements of 1085 and 1086. Rather than the backward-looking outlook commonly ascribed to him, he showed willingness at this time to respond to present exigencies.

Early in 1086 Sima Guang suffered an illness that, despite periods of remission, afflicted him for the remaining nine months of his life. It was not the first time that he had suffered from poor health: while in Luoyang in the autumn of 1082 he had suffered a suspected stroke. Now, though, illness interfered with official duties. A pustule on his left foot left him unable to walk and prevented him from meeting the full ritual demands of court. It was a cause for personal concern. He submitted several memorials claiming that it was inappropriate for a senior official to recuperate at home and not to attend to his court duties; a concern with the division of titles and functions sounded again. He therefore tendered his resignation from his official posts. It was not accepted. Instead, the opposite happened: on 18 March 1086, he was appointed to an advanced post as a Vice Director of the Secretariat, giving him overall control of governance and a secure platform from which to revoke Wang Anshi's policies. He died still in office, in the Chancellery building, on 11 October 1086.

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