



The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian (Suny Series, Chinese Philosophy & Culture)

Stephen W. Durrant

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Sima Qian's vast *Records of the Historian* is the first comprehensive history of China and has exerted an immense influence both upon our understanding of the Chinese past and also upon the style and structure of subsequent Chinese historiography. In addition to his contribution as a historian, Sima Qian is a highly significant literary figure whose writings are among the most elegant and powerful from the ancient world. Durrant's study approaches Sima Qian's work from a literary perspective and demonstrates the relationship between Sima's narrative of the past and his narrative of his own life. That life was a fascinating and complex one. Enjoined by his father to complete a comprehensive history of China, Sima Qian subsequently offended the great Emperor Wu and was sentenced to castration. Rather than take the "noble path" of suicide, he suffered this traumatic punishment and lived on to fulfill his father's injunction-but not without emotional scars, scars that influenced his portrayal of the Chinese past. In fact, the great Han historian's account of the Chinese past, this study argues, is as much his story as it is history.

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