

# *Si Maqian's Sense of Revenge from the Biography of Wu Zixu*

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**Abstract:** In literary history, Si Maqian often appears as the image of a loyal and patriotic character who endures humiliation. The positive tendencies in his personal emotions are infinitely magnified under human control, but the negatively inclined emotions are always shunned because they do not conform to the Confucian laws used by the king for ruling. If we look at Si Maqian as a complete human being, it is impossible for him not to resent the fact that he was alienated by the king and tortured in the palace. This paper mainly discusses Si Maqian's sense of revenge as revealed in the *Biography of Wu Zixu*, and this study has made the character of Si Maqian more vivid and concrete, taking him away from the saintly state of melancholic concern for his country. It provides a more choice and reference for the future analysis of Si Maqian's authorship; it provides more possibilities for the future analysis of the cultural environment of the Han Dynasty.

**Keywords:** Si Maqian, Wu Zixu, Revenge consciousness, Author figure.

## 1. Introduction

For Si Maqian, it is often said that he was a loyal and patriotic man who endured humiliation. However, such a study lacks a more multi-dimensional understanding of Si Maqian. The purpose of this paper is to examine Si Maqian's resentment towards experiencing estrangement from his country's ruler and being subjected to court punishment - resentments that were explicitly forbidden in the laws and dominant cultural tonalities of the Han Dynasty. These hidden hatreds and sense of revenge will be glimpsed in the writings of Si Maqian.

## 2. Previous Analyses of *Si Maqian's* Characterisation

### 2.1. *Si Maqian's* Image in Literary History

Du Heng has proposed a framework based on Alexander Nehamas-author's dual bodies [1]. This theory suggests that when we look at those authors in history, we need to look at them as two authors. Body Natural refers to the author himself who lived in a certain dynasty, like Si Maqian, who lived in the Han dynasty, and Body Authorial refers to the symbolic image of the author constructed by multiple texts, like the image of the author Si Maqian implied by *Shi Ji*, and the image of the letter-writer implied by *The Letter to Ren An* [2]. The latter evaluative genre constructs the author's dual bodies, which is a theory based on Alexandre Nehamas, Si Maqian's image constructed from later

evaluative texts. Because of the different writing environments and authors of different texts, this leads to the fact that Si Maqian's image with different biases will be analysed.

Jan Assmann, a German cultural scientist, has proposed the theory of cultural memory. This theory incorporates memory discourse into the theoretical framework of cultural studies and explores the cultural and identity functions of memory from the external dimension of human memory. Martin Kern combines the theory of cultural memory with early Chinese literature, pointing out that cultural memory is not an objective historical reproduction, but a reconstruction and selective memory of the past by a social group according to its own needs and interests in the present. This reconstruction and selective memory is dynamic and inextricably linked to the construction of social identities, political identities, and power structures of authors, readers, and editors [3]. For example, *The Letter to Ren An* and *Shi-Ji-Biography*, both written by the same author, embody different authorial images, with *The Letter to Ren An* embodying a more personal and emotional Si Maqian. *The Letter to Ren An* represents a more personal Si Maqian [2], while *Shi-Ji-Biography* represents a Si Maqian who emphasises cultural heritage and moral responsibility, which is more official and less personal than the Si Maqian in *The Letter to Ren An* [4].

A different image of the author is hidden in different works. As a result, almost all the author image evaluations that have existed have been based on the work rather than on the full experience of the author in its ideal state. In this case, it is inevitable that there are omissions in the evaluation of the author figure. By mining different works, more author images will be uncovered.

## 2.2. Influence of Si Maqian's Environment on Him

Si Maqian grew up under the influence of Confucianism, and his father, Si Matan, wanted Si Maqian to be a "Sage of History" like *Confucius* [5]. In the first half of his life, Si Maqian practiced this view, and after the palace punishment, his Confucian construct was shaken! In the first half of Si Maqian's life, he practiced this view, and after the palace punishment, his Confucian framework was shaken, and he went from being a profiteer under the Confucian framework to being excluded by the environment, which made him understand tradition and history differently, and made his later works full of contradictions and conflicts, as well as focusing on the complexity of human nature in the writing of *Shi Ji*.

## 3. The Rationality of Si Maqian's Sense of Revenge Latent in Biography of Wu Zixu

Si Maqian, because of his status as a historian, had a different view on *Li Ling's* surrender from that of the emperor, and after defending Li Ling, he offended Emperor Wu, lost his favourite status, and was sentenced to death by palace. The drastic change in Si Maqian's status also brought about different emotions. Among them, the emotion of revenge is a deep emotion buried underneath all the emotions.

### 3.1. Revenge Consciousness Lurking in Biography of Wu Zixu

*The Biography of Wu Zixu* is an article with a strong sense of vengeance in *Shi Ji*. After his father and brother were killed by the king of Chu, Wu Zixu fled the country, suffered a series of humiliations, and had almost no way to escape. He is finally employed by the new king of Wu, Prince Guang, and takes part in Wu's campaign against Chu for several years. On the premise that the murderer, the king of Chu, was already dead, Wu Zixu also dug up the murderer's grave and whipped him three hundred times [6]. Wu Zixu's twenty-year-long hatred for the murderer and the act of digging up the grave and whipping the body show a strong sense of vengeance.

Si Maqian also portrayed a range of other vengeful images in the *Biography of Wu Zixu*. Fu Chai, the crown prince of the king of Wu, after his father died of serious injuries because of an attack on

Chu, attacked Chu again two years later, taking the king as a prisoner. Shen Baoxu, a minister of Chu, went to Qin to ask for help after the defeat of Chu by Wu Zixu, and “wept day and night, seven days and seven nights without stopping his voice”, and the king of Qin eventually agreed to help Chu. Bai Gong's father was killed when he fled with Wu Zixu, and in the aftermath *Bai Gong* kept trying to take revenge, but failed and finally committed suicide in the mountains [7]. All these images of revenge reinforce the sense of vengeance in the Biography of Wu Zixu.

### 3.2. *Si Maqian's Collation and Adaptation of the Instances of Wu Zixu*

In the three biographies of the Spring and Autumn Periods, there were records of Wu Zixu's cases. *The Zuo Zhuan* (左传) only wrote “Chu then began to be sick” [8] to summarise the defeat of Chu by Wu, and did not deliberately depict the story of Wu Zixu's revenge. A more expanded description is given in the *Gongyang Zhuan* (公羊传). The first record of Wu Zixu's behaviour towards the king of Chu for his whipping of the grave is found in *the Guliang Zhuan* (穀梁传). In the Guoyu account, more emphasis is placed on depicting Wu Zixu's wisdom, courage and loyalty. Lu Shi Chun Qiu (The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu Shi) records for the first time Wu Zixu's act of “whipping the grave of 300” [9], but the record of his vengeance is rather sketchy.

In *Shi Ji*, Si Maqian describes in detail the reasons for Wu Zixu's vengeance, and the fact that his brother chose to go to his death while leaving the more difficult task of revenge on Si Maqian makes the sense of hatred well-founded. Si Maqian also focuses on Wu Zixu's patience in order to take his revenge in *Shi Ji*. When the king of Wu was not yet fit to appoint himself to attack Chu, he retreated to the mountains and forests to make the king of Wu attack Chu at the right time. This enlivens the process of revenge and further enhances the portrayal of Wu Zixu's cleverness [10].

### 3.3. *Comparison between Han Shu and Shi Ji in terms of the content of revenge*

To explore Sima Qian's own sense of revenge latent in the *Shi Ji*, it is necessary to compare the *Shi Ji* with other historical books of the Han Dynasty period. Generally speaking, in a dynasty, the writing style and content of a class of texts are by and large similar due to the limitations of the era's ethos. Excluding the differences in content due to the different periods recorded, most of the differences in content between different books come from the differences in the authors' viewpoints and writing styles. Here, *Han Shu* is used as an example to compare the content of revenge recorded in *Shi Ji*.

Revenge in these two books is broadly divided into revenge for the country, revenge for blood relatives, and self-revenge. In *Han Shu*, the majority of the revenge is in the form of blood relatives' revenge, which shows the strong Confucian idea of filial piety [11]. The *Shi Ji*, on the other hand, emphasises the self-revenge of the avenger when it writes about revenge for the state and revenge for blood relatives. In the story of Wu Zixu's revenge, it focuses on Wu Zixu's motives, experiences and results of his revenge, and highlights Wu Zixu's personal portrayal and self-revenge by depicting his twisted course of vengeance and his vengeance to vent his anger.

However, it should be emphasised that Sima Qian's portrayal of self-revenge does not mean that he glorifies those who take revenge only for the sake of their own personal will, but that this portrayal is only his emphasis on the individual's will to take revenge in the context of revenge for the country and revenge for blood relatives. For example, in *The Legend of the Coolies*, Zhang Tang and Li Wen are not bright in their means of vengeance, as Li Wen dies in the end in a well-arranged murder of favouritism and lawlessness. In his evaluation, Sima Qian was displeased with Zhang Tang's character and his vengeful behaviour. Another example is that, both of them were taking revenge for the country, Sima Qian praised Goujian and belittled Fu Zha, he thought that Fu Zha's revenge was not righteous and also had faults in his character, so he was not as bright as Goujian, who had endured humiliation and humiliation [12].

#### 4. Necessity of *Si Maqian's* Inputting the Sense of Vengeance into His Works

With the gradual establishment of the law of vengeance in the Han Dynasty, the state used legal means to restrict and punish acts of vengeance in the way of governance, and the atmosphere of the society gradually became more serious about the event of vengeance [13]. This made vengeance no longer an event worthy of unconditional praise. In addition, the social tolerance of revenge is in the context of Confucianism for blood relatives' revenge and does not include the discontent with the traditional monarchical and ministerial structure that Si Maqian suffers from. Therefore, it is reasonable that Si Maqian hides his sense of revenge and puts it into his work later.

#### 5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on *Sima Qian's* sense of vengeance displayed in *Shi Ji - Biography of Wu Zixu*, thus revealing *Sima Qian's* complex emotions as a complete character. Through the detailed depiction of *Wu Zixu's* revenge story, Sima Qian hides his revenge emotion in his work, which makes the image of *Wu Zixu* more vivid and concrete, and at the same time reflects Sima Qian's silent resistance to the social system of that time. The reasonableness and necessity of hiding Sima Qian's sense of vengeance in the Biography of Wu Zixu emphasises the sense of vengeance that Sima Qian has hidden under the cultural images of the past. Against this background, Sima Qian's incorporation of the sense of revenge into his work is both a hidden resistance to personal encounters and a challenge to the traditional Confucian concept of revenge. This is a conjecture that combines the family, social, political, and cultural environments in which Sima Qian lived. By exploring Sima Qian's sense of revenge, this paper provides new perspectives and references for future analyses of Sima Qian's writings and the cultural environment in which he lived. There are still many shortcomings in this paper, for example, the study of Sima Qian's character image is not deep enough, the literature study of Wu Zixu's deeds is also partially missing, and the analysis combined with the environment at that time is not thorough enough. Follow-up research can start from a more in-depth analysis of the private emotions latent in Sima Qian's works.

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