

The Letter to Ren An

English Translation

THE DIRECTOR OF ARCHIVES SIMA QIAN, A MENIAL trudging ahead of the horse, repeatedly bows low in respect and speaks.¹ Honorable Shaoqing, sometime ago you condescended to send a letter instructing me about my responsibilities to exercise due care when dealing with others and my duty to recommend worthy men and promote gentlemen for court service. While your intention was utterly sincere, it is as if you thought that I might not regard you as my teacher but would instead treat your words as the advice of the common run of men. I would not dare behave in such a way. Although but a broken-down nag, I have stood by and heeded my elders' examples. Now, however, I consider my body ruined and debased. Whenever I act, I meet reproach. Those I would benefit, I only harm. "So it is I stifle my grief and have no one to speak to."² A proverb asks, "On whose behalf would you act? And who can be made to heed you?" After Zhongzi Qi died, Boya never again played the lute.³ Why is that? A gentleman will do his utmost for someone who appreciates him, just as a woman will adorn herself for someone who delights in her.⁴ But in cases like mine, when the body has been mutilated beyond repair, things are different: even if the person possesses the fine qualities of Sui's pearl or He's jade, and conducts himself as well as Xu You or Boyi, he can never achieve honor and glory. He would only provoke ridicule and besmirch himself.⁵

I should have answered your letter, but I was just at that time traveling toward the east with the emperor.⁶ And then I was pressed with inconsequential business so that there were but a few days when we could have seen each another. I was so busy that I did not have a single moment to express my feelings fully to you. But now, Shaoqing, you have been declared guilty of an unfathomably serious crime. The weeks and months are passing by, and soon it will be the final month of winter.⁷ I am once again compelled to accompany the emperor up to Yong and fear that suddenly the unspeakable might befall

you. And were I ultimately unable to vent my frustration and resentment and make them known, then a spirit departing for the long journey would harbor boundless regret.⁸ So allow me to sketch out my crude thoughts, and please do not blame me for my prolonged failure to respond.

I have heard that self-cultivation is the storehouse of wisdom; magnanimity, the beginning of humaneness; discernment, the mark of dutifulness; shame, after disgrace the decisive factor in courage; and the desire to leave a good name, the ultimate wellspring of good behavior.⁹ Only after a gentleman possesses these five virtues can he be commended to his generation and listed in the ranks of the truly noble. Thus, no disaster is more hateful than that springing from coveting advantage;¹⁰ no sorrow more painful than a shattered spirit; no action more repugnant than dishonoring one's forebears; and no infamy greater than suffering castration. A man left a remnant from a mutilating punishment counts for nothing in others' estimation. Not only in one era has this been so. This has always been the case.

In times past, when Lord Ling of Wei shared a chariot with Yong Qu, Confucius left for Chen.¹¹ When Shang Yang relied on the Eunuch Jing to win an audience with the Qin ruler, Zhao Liang's heart froze.¹² And when the Han emperor had Zhao Tong ride with him in his carriage, Yuan Si turned red with anger and dismay.¹³ From antiquity, then, to consort with eunuchs has been a source of shame. Even a man of mediocre talent will always risk real damage to his *qi* when he comes into contact with a eunuch in the course of his business.¹⁴ How much more so a gentleman with soaring aspirations! The court may currently lack the right sort of men, but why do you think it would allow a remnant of knife and saw to recommend men of distinction in the empire?

Thanks to my father's position, I have managed to serve for more than twenty years at the foot of the emperor's chariot, always awaiting punishment for my crimes.¹⁵ From this I have learned some things about myself: First, I have been unable to demonstrate my loyal service or prove my trustworthiness, nor have I gained a reputation as a fine talent and hard worker such as would bind our illustrious ruler to me. Second, I have been unable to remedy deficiencies in the administration, making sure that the summonses duly go out to worthy men to take up office and that those living in seclusion become famous. As for external threats, I have failed to serve in the military ranks. I have captured no forts and fought on no field. I have gained no merit for beheading enemy generals and seizing enemy flags. Finally, I have not been able to exert every effort and accumulate achievements, to obtain high office and an exalted position, so as to bring glory and imperial favor to my family and those I am in contact with.¹⁶ I have not succeeded in any one of these four

endeavors. It should be obvious that in simply conforming to the expectations of others and seeking their approval, I have not been of the slightest utility to the court.¹⁷

In the past, I was regularly placed among the lower officers who participate in minor deliberations in the outer court. I did not make use of that time to elicit a master plan for governing or to offer my best thinking. Today, with my ruined body, I am fit only to be a servant who sweeps and cleans, dwelling among the most despised. Were I now to lecture others about rights and wrongs in an arrogant fashion, would that not insult the court and shame the gentlemen of our age? Alas! Alas! For one like me, what is there still to say? What is there still to say?

Moreover, the course of events is not easy to explain. As a youth my behavior was unrestrained; as I grew up, I won no fine name in my hometown. Fortunately for me, our ruler, on account of my deceased father, ordered me to offer my meager skills to the court and gave me leave to come and go in the royal presence.¹⁸ But how can someone with a basin on his head ever look up to Heaven?¹⁹ So I cut myself off from the recognition of associates and ignored my duties to my family. Day and night I wore myself out thinking how best to use every meager talent that I have in service; I strove to devote myself wholeheartedly to my official duties, the better to draw close to our ruler²⁰ and gain his favor. But in the course of acting so, I made a big mistake, and it was not to be.

Now, Li Ling and I had served together in the palace, but we were never on particularly close terms.²¹ As our inclinations ran along different paths, we had neither shared a single cup of wine nor formed a lively friendship. Observing his behavior, however, I considered him to be a gentleman of unusual ability. He was filial in serving his parents, trustworthy in dealings with peers, incorruptible in handling money, fair in giving and taking, deferential in maintaining the proper hierarchies, and attentive and modest in yielding to others. He always considered how best to meet any emergency that besets the ruling house, with no concern for his personal safety. In view of all his previous accomplishments, I deemed him a gentleman of quality fully able to serve the realm. For it is truly remarkable when a subject resolves to go out to face ten thousand deaths without the slightest regard for his own life or rushes forward to help out in any disaster that befalls the realm! But now, in the course of discharging his duties, he made one mistake, and court officials, who thought only of saving their skins and preserving their wives and children, stepped forward to exaggerate his shortcomings! This truly made me sick at heart!

Moreover, Li Ling led fewer than five thousand foot soldiers and marched deep into the lands defended by nomads on horseback. He and his men

reached all the way to the Khan's court, dangling bait in the tiger's mouth and boldly challenging those invincible Xiongnu. Facing tens of thousands of enemy troops,²² they engaged the Khan's men in battle for over ten days, killing more than the number of troops in their own army. The enemy had no time to rescue the dying and succor the wounded; their leaders, dressed in their felts and furs, all quaked with fear. As a result, the Khan summoned his Worthy Kings of Right and Left.²³ He enlisted anyone who could draw a bow and had his entire nation join in the attack and surround Li Ling's troops. Li Ling's army pushed for more than three hundred miles, fighting skirmishes every step of the way, until their arrows were gone and the road blocked. No rescue forces arrived, and the dead and wounded piled up.²⁴ Even so, when Li Ling gave a call to rally his troops, each and every soldier rose up. With their faces covered in tears and awash with blood, their ranks advanced, thrusting forward their empty wooden bows to meet the enemies' shining metal blades, even as they choked back their sobs. They then turned north to continue the struggle to the death against the enemy. Before Li Ling had fallen into captivity, his messenger came to the Han court to report this, and all the court officers and princes raised their goblets to toast His Majesty's health.

A few days later there came word of Li Ling's defeat. Because of this news, our ruler could no longer savor his food or enjoy granting audiences. The high-ranking ministers, in their grief and fear, did not know what to do. When I observed the emperor so distraught and downcast, I really wanted to help him by giving him sincere advice, however stupid. In doing so, I failed to take into account my low status. Considering that Li Ling had always denied himself the best foods so that he might share them with his fellow officers, it was no mere coincidence that he had been able to get his men to fight to the death.²⁵ Even the most famous generals of ancient times could not surpass him in this regard. No matter that he had suffered defeat, one should ponder his intentions²⁶ and, moreover, credit him with the desire to find the right way to repay the Han.²⁷ His situation had left him with no options, yet his merit, considering the enemy troops he smote, should have sufficed to win him fame throughout the empire. I harbored a wish to explain all of this, but I found no way to do so. Just at that point, I was summoned into the imperial presence on a question, and I took the opportunity to speak of Li Ling's achievements in these very terms, hoping thereby to broaden the ruler's understanding of the situation and block the resentful criticisms. I somehow could not fully explain what I meant, and our illustrious ruler did not entirely understand. He thought that I was slandering the Ershi General, Li Guangli, while making clever excuses for Li Ling, so I was sent down, a condemned man, to the judges. For all my sincere

and steadfast loyalty, I ultimately could not give a good account of my actions. In consequence, I was found guilty of deceiving the emperor, and finally the judges' decision was upheld.²⁸

My family, being poor, had insufficient funds to purchase remission of my crime.²⁹ None of my acquaintances offered to save me, and none of my close associates put in a single word on my behalf.³⁰ A body is not made of wood or stone! With only the officers of the law for company, I was kept in confinement deep within the prison walls. To whom could I voice my grievances? This is something that you, Shaoqing, have seen for yourself. Were my actions not as I have written? Once Li Ling had surrendered, and thus ruined his family's good name, I, too, was thrust into the Silkworm Chamber,³¹ becoming irrevocably the laughingstock of the empire.³² So tragic! So very tragic! It is not easy to explain this sequence of events to vulgar men.

My late father's merit was not on a par with those dignitaries with broken tallies or vermillion prescripts.³³ Men of letters, archivists, astronomers, and calendrical experts³⁴ are classed with the diviners and invocators. In fact, these men the ruler toys with and patronizes in the same way as entertainers. They are held in disdain even by the common run of men. Had I bowed to the law and accepted the death penalty, it would have seemed of no more importance than a single hair lost from the hides of nine oxen. In what way would I differ from an ant or a mite? Then, too, the world would not affirm me as one able to die for his principles.³⁵ Rather it would assume that I simply could not extricate myself from the net of the law and so went to my death, my wisdom exhausted and my crime so extreme. Why is that? It is the position in which I have established myself that would make them think this.

Surely, a man has but one death. That death may be as heavy as Mount Tai or as light as a goose feather. It is how he uses that death that makes all the difference!³⁶ Above all, one must not dishonor one's forebears. Next in importance, a man must not allow anyone to insult his person. Next, his appearance and bearing must not be dishonored. Next, his speech or his commands must not be dishonored. Next, one must not submit to the dishonor of having one's body bent or bound; or, even worse, of having one's robes exchanged for prisoner's garb; or, worse still, of being confined in the stocks and flogged. The next worst is the dishonor of having the head shaved and being put in shackles. Further down the scale is the dishonor of having the flesh carved or limbs severed.³⁷ But the very lowest, the greatest dishonor of all, is castration, the punishment that corrupts the flesh! As the old tradition says, "The mutilating punishments are not to be applied to the high officials."³⁸ That means a gentleman's principles must always be properly honed.

When a fierce tiger lives deep in the mountains, all the other animals tremble in fear. But when it is in a pit or pen, it wags its tail and begs for food. So powerful is the gradual effect of serial acts of intimidation. So if someone were to draw a line on the ground and declare it to be a jail, a gentleman would still think it wiser not to step inside. And if someone were to carve a piece of wood and pronounce it a legal officer, a gentleman would still not consider answering its charges.³⁹ He would make his plans with greater aims in mind.⁴⁰ But let us suppose that a man has his hands and feet tied, that he is bound by the wooden collar and ropes, that he has to bare his flesh, that he suffers a flogging, and then has been imprisoned deep within a cell. Such a man will, at a time like this, fall down to his knees and knock his head on the ground when he sees the prison guard; his heart will race with fear when he looks upon the jailer. And why is that? Such is the inexorable momentum of serial acts of intimidation. For a man in such a sorry state to then claim that he is not disgraced is just putting up a false front. He would deserve no respect whatsoever.

Then, too, the Earl of the West, despite his rank, was confined at Youli.⁴¹ Li Si, despite being a prime minister, suffered all the Five Mutilating Punishments.⁴² The King of Huaiyin, though a king, was manacled in Chen.⁴³ Peng Yue and Zhang Ao, both rulers in their own right, nonetheless were bound up in prison and they paid for their crimes.⁴⁴ After the Marquis of Jiang executed the Lü family members, his power could have toppled the Five Overlords, but he was still later imprisoned in the Hall for Begging Pardon.⁴⁵ Wei Qi was a great general, but he was dressed in the criminal's dark red garments, with his head, hands, and feet fettered.⁴⁶ Ji Bu became a slave with a metal collar in the Zhu household, and Guan Fu suffered disgrace in the Hall of Detention.⁴⁷

All these men had risen to the ranks of kings and princes, generals or prime ministers. Their names were known even in neighboring states. Nonetheless, as soon as they were implicated in crimes and they fell into the net of the laws, not one of them was able to decide to commit suicide. When a person is surrounded by mire and filth, it has always been the same, in ancient and modern times: How can anyone not but be disgraced? Speaking from this point of view, courage or cowardice is a matter of the momentum of events, while strength or weakness depends on the specific situation.⁴⁸

This is clear enough, surely! What is there to marvel at? I would add that if a man is unable to take his own life before he is tied in ropes and tattooed, so much so that he is gradually worn down as he falls below the whips and clubs, if then and only then he were to start acting on principle, wouldn't that be far-fetched? This is probably why the Ancients took the application of the mutilating punishments to high officials so seriously.

It is the human condition to covet life and hate death, to think longingly of parents and loved ones, and to care for one's wife and children. But those who are driven by a sense of duty and by principles are not like that, for such imperatives invariably dictate how they behave. Unfortunately I lost both my parents early in life and I have no brothers, so I was isolated and had to make my way alone. And you, Shaoqing, have seen how much store I set by my wife and child.⁴⁹ Then, too, the brave do not always die for integrity, while even a coward who longs to do his duty may exert himself to the utmost in every situation he confronts. I may have been cowardly and weak when I wanted to survive at all costs, but I would argue that I, for my part, had some small inkling about the principles by which one makes the right choices. How could I have come to be sunk in the dishonor of being bound by chains? If even a captive slave or a maidservant can commit suicide, how much more so for me, who cannot help but be driven by moral imperatives to disdain mere survival? The reason I suffered in silence and lived on in disgrace, refusing to retreat even when mired in filth, was that I would have hated not to fully express what I held in my heart. I would have despised myself for dying before the glory of my writings could be displayed to later generations.⁵⁰

Too many to count are the men of ancient times who possessed great wealth and honor yet perished without a trace. Only people of the most exceptional caliber are still acclaimed. The Earl of the West was detained and elaborated the *Zhou Changes*; Confucius was in distress and produced the *Annals*; Qu Yuan was exiled and thus composed "Encountering Sorrow"; Zuo Qiuming lost his vision and thus there was the *Discourses of the States*; Sunzi, after his feet were cut off, composed the *Strategies of Warfare*; Lü Buwei was exiled to Shu, and generations have passed down his *Examinations of Lü*; Han Fei, imprisoned in Qin, had his "Difficulties of Persuasion" and "Frustration of Solitude." And the *Odes*' three hundred pieces were mostly produced by worthy and wise men venting their frustrations. In all such cases these men were filled with pent-up emotions because their way was blocked.⁵¹ Consequently, they narrated the past while thinking of future generations. As for Zuo Qiuming, who lost his vision, and Sunzi, whose feet were cut off, they were no longer fit to serve at court.⁵² So they withdrew and wrote their various accounts to vent their frustrations, intent on handing down empty words to make themselves known.⁵³

Lacking all humility, I have presumed in recent times to entrust my spirit to my clumsy writings. I have cast a broad net across the old accounts that have been lost or neglected. Examining these in light of past events, I have gathered together all the evidence for cosmic and dynastic cycles,⁵⁴ having studied the underlying causes of success and failure, and of rise and decline. In altogether

130 chapters,⁵⁵ I have tried to probe the boundaries of heaven and man and comprehend the changes of past and present, thereby perfecting a tradition for my family.⁵⁶

My draft was not yet finished when I met with this disaster. Thinking that it would be a pity were my work not to be completed, I submitted to the most extreme punishment without betraying any signs of resentment. If truly I can finish this book and see it stored away in Famous Mountain,⁵⁷ and then passed down to the appropriate people, who will make it known in towns and big cities, then I will have made up for the burden of my previous disgrace. Then, even if I were to suffer ten thousand deaths, how could I feel any regret? This being the case with me, this is something that can be discussed with wise men, but it is hard to speak of such things with vulgar people.

I would add that it is not easy to bear the burden of calumny, for slander accumulates like dirty water downstream.⁵⁸ I met with this disaster as a result of my words and I have become the butt of ridicule in my own hometown. I have disgraced my forebears. How could I ever again brazenly ascend the grave mounds of my parents?⁵⁹ Even after one hundred generations the defilement will only deepen! That is why my guts churn all day long.⁶⁰ At home I am in a daze, as if I have lost something. Going out of the house, I forget where it is I am going. Every time I think of this shame, my back breaks out in a sweat that soaks my robe. I am only an official serving in the women's quarters.⁶¹ If only I could withdraw into deep seclusion among the crags and caves! For the time being, I must drift about, following the ordinary customs, going up and down with the times, in order to get along with its reckless delusions.⁶²

Now, you, Shaoqing, instruct me to recommend worthies and promote fine gentlemen. Would that not be totally at odds with my own situation and inclinations? And now, even if I wanted to refine myself or use elegant language to explain myself, it would be futile. The world would not believe me, and I would merely bring further disgrace upon myself. In sum, only long after my death will the rights and wrongs of this finally be determined. As they say, "Words cannot express everything that is in the mind,"⁶³ and so I have briefly outlined what my crude ruminations have been.