

# Political Metaphors in the Representation of Strategists: Fan Li and Zhang Liang in *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian*

**Jiawei Li**

Department of Chinese Literature,  
Yulin Normal University, Guangxi  
Zhuang Autonomous Region, China  
Corresponding author:  
ussrussiabraginskaya@gmail.com

## Abstract:

Against the backdrop of traditional Chinese historiography, figures such as Fan Li and Zhang Liang have long been regarded as emblematic strategists whose careers embody the tension between political authority, ethical judgment, and personal withdrawal. This paper focuses on their representations in Sima Qian's *Shiji* and Sima Guang's *Zizhi Tongjian*, with the aim of revealing how two eminent historians constructed these characters to serve distinct historiographical purposes. Employing a comparative textual analysis, the study examines narrative strategies, thematic emphases, and contextual differences between the two works. The findings indicate that Sima Qian highlights the complexity of early Han political ecology, presenting Fan Li and Zhang Liang as figures negotiating between power, cunning, and moral ambiguity, whereas Sima Guang reshapes them within a didactic framework aligned with his moral and political agenda for governance. The study concludes that these divergent portrayals not only illuminate the contrasting historical consciousness and value orientations but also demonstrate the broader role of biographical writing in articulating historiographical intent within the Chinese intellectual tradition.

**Keywords:** Historiographical Intent; *Shiji*; *Zizhi Tongjian*; Fan Li; Zhang Liang.

## 1. Introduction

Scholars have long observed that, in traditional Chinese historiography, the figures of strategists and political advisors often embody multiple layers of meaning. They are portrayed not only as embodiments of wisdom and moral integrity but also as par-

ticipants entangled in the intricate dynamics of power and political maneuvering. Notably, the narratives of Fan Li and Zhang Liang—emphasizing the principle of “achieving success and then withdrawing from public life”—have been repeatedly recounted, elaborated, and reconstructed across different historical texts, reflecting both the authors' interpretive strat-

egies and the evolving political contexts in which these stories were recorded. From the *Guoyu* to the *Shiji* and later the *Zizhi Tongjian*, the representations of these figures gradually transcend the boundaries of historical fact and evolve into symbols endowed with rich interpretive possibilities [1-3]. Such symbolism encompasses both the projection of political ideals and the implicit metaphors of power relations. Existing scholarship suggests that Sima Qian's portrayal of Fan Li in the *Shiji* was profoundly influenced by the Huang-Lao philosophical trend and the political realities of the early Han dynasty. Researchers argue that Sima Qian was not a passive compiler of pre-Qin materials; rather, he actively reinterpreted and artistically reconstructed the story of Fan Li by drawing upon the contemporary figure of Zhang Liang, whose own narrative exemplified the ideal of "achieving success and then withdrawing from public life." This study reveals that Fan Li's classic ending—"sailing away on the Five Lakes"—serves as a profound example of Sima Qian's synthesis of history and contemporaneity. It illustrates the historian's intent to articulate the Huang-Lao doctrines of "strategic subtlety" and "the philosophy of withdrawal", thereby providing a crucial theoretical lens for the present research.

Sima Qian composed the *Shiji* as a privately authored history, aiming to express his personal understanding and critique of historical events. In contrast, Sima Guang compiled the *Zizhi Tongjian* under imperial commission, emphasizing the use of history as a mirror for governance and moral instruction. Owing to these fundamental differences in authorship background and ideological intent, their portrayals of strategists exhibit significant divergences in narrative construction and moral orientation. This study focuses on the representations of Fan Li and Zhang Liang in *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian*. Employing a combination of comparative analysis and close reading, it aims to systematically examine the similarities and differences between the two works in terms of source selection, narrative strategies, and evaluative commentary. At the same time, this paper situates the texts within their specific historical and intellectual contexts, employing contextual reconstruction to elucidate the causes of their differences. Furthermore, it incorporates theories related to character representation to explore the political ideas and cultural values embodied in the image of the strategist.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Historical Context

### 2.1 Political Metaphors and Historiographical

### Techniques

Political metaphors, as a historiographical narrative strategy, refer to the method by which historians, in compiling historical records, indirectly convey their political ideals and value judgments through the depiction of personalities, actions, and outcomes [4,5]. In historiographical practice, this approach does not involve the direct exposition of political commentary; rather, it conveys critique, admonition, or caution implicitly through the destinies and choices of historical figures. For instance, Fan Li's "achieving success and then withdrawing from public life" in the *Shiji* is not merely a recounting of his personal career, but also serves as Sima Qian's metaphorical interpretation of the prudential wisdom required to navigate the realms of power [1,6]. In contrast, Sima Guang's depiction of Zhang Liang's "strategic planning behind the scenes" in the *Zizhi Tongjian* is situated within a narrative framework emphasizing imperial governance and the selection of capable officials, highlighting the crucial role of a minister's strategy in the rise and fall of the state [4,7,8]. Thus, it is evident that political metaphors transform historical texts from mere chronicles of facts into a profound dialogue between historians and contemporary political realities. Through this metaphorical approach, historical figures transcend the limitations of individual fate and are imbued with symbolic significance pertaining to state governance, ruler-minister relations, and social order.

### 2.2 The Historiographical Missions of Sima Qian and Sima Guang

Behind the narrative strategy of "political metaphor," Sima Qian and Sima Guang display distinct differences arising from their divergent historiographical missions and authorial standpoints. Sima Qian, in the Self-Preface of the Grand Historian (Taishigong Zixu), proposed "to investigate the relationship between Heaven and humanity, to comprehend the transformations between the ancient and the present, and to establish a discourse of his own"[2]. This historiographical manifesto not only reveals the *Shiji*'s intellectual ambition but also indicates that the work essentially belongs to the category of private historiography. Unlike official chronicles commissioned by the court, the *Shiji* was not written under imperial order; rather, it was an independent grand historical enterprise completed by Sima Qian through his personal will and lived experience, especially after enduring the profound trauma of castration [9,10]. Consequently, the entire work is imbued with a pronounced sense of individual sentiment and a critical spirit [5]. Sima Qian paid particular attention to the lived experiences and spiritual values of historical figures: in portraying Fan Li, he emphasized the wisdom

of “achieving success and then withdrawing from public life” [6]; in depicting Zhang Liang, he highlighted both his strategic acumen in planning behind the scenes and his approach to voluntary retreat from public affairs [3,9]. These portrayals not only create vivid characterizations but also reflect the historian’s deep concern for individual destinies and historical circumstances, while embodying nuanced reflections on the dynamics of power and the value of personal freedom.

In contrast, Sima Guang, in the Preface to the Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government (*Zizhi Tongjian Xu*), explicitly stated that his purpose in compiling the work was “to examine the rise and fall of past dynasties and to assess the gains and losses of the present” [3]. Commissioned by Emperor Yingzong of the Song dynasty and completed during the reign of Emperor Shenzong, the work exhibits the characteristic features of official historiography [8]. Sima Guang’s historiographical mission was to provide a “mirror for governance” for contemporary rulers; consequently, the narrative framework of the entire work is closely structured around the themes of “order and disorder, rise and fall,” to summarize historical experience for imperial instruction [7]. In portraying Fan Li, Sima Qian emphasized his practical wisdom in financial management and statecraft, illustrating principles of governance; in depicting Zhang Liang, he focused on highlighting his role as a minister and his loyal commitment, underscoring the governing principle that “a ruler should make good use of capable ministers” [3]. Unlike Sima Qian, who emphasized the individual spirit in his portrayals, Sima Guang focused more on using historical figures’ stories to provide political models for contemporary rulers to emulate.

Overall, both historians exhibit a shared use of “political metaphor” in their characterizations: they employ historical figures to convey political reflections and express concern for contemporary realities [3]. However, their fundamental differences are also striking: Sima Qian, writing a “private history,” emphasized the individual spirit, with a style marked by strong critical insight and a sense of intellectual freedom; by contrast, Sima Guang, composing an “official history,” pursued governance-oriented instruction, with a narrative that is more institutionalized and utilitarian [5,7]. The former, “expressing personal sentiments through history,” highlights the historian’s independent personality and genuine emotions; the latter, “using history to aid governance,” reflects the functional requirement that historiography serves political purposes and the ruler. Precisely for this reason, Fan Li and Zhang Liang are imbued with different historiographical significance in the two works: in *Shiji*, they symbolize individual wisdom and personal choice [6,9]; in *Zizhi Tongjian*,

they are transformed into emblematic figures representing statecraft and ruler–minister relations [3,8].

### 3. A Study of the Character Metaphors of Fan Li and Zhang Liang in *Shiji*

Within the grand narrative of *Shiji*, Sima Qian employs the figures of Fan Li and Zhang Liang to convey distinctive political metaphors and ideals of life [2]. Although situated in different historical contexts, both strategists achieve self-transcendence through the posture of “retiring after success,” becoming exemplars of ideal character in the historians’ narratives [5]. Through their stories, Sima Qian not only reveals the complexity of individual wisdom and political decision-making but also conveys his profound reflections on the relationship between autocratic power and individual destiny.

Before delving into an in-depth analysis of Fan Li and Zhang Liang, it is necessary to first clarify their distinctive positions within the narrative of *Shiji*. As outstanding representatives among the cohort of strategists, they are not merely witnesses to or participants in historical events but serve as important symbols through which Sima Qian conveys his historiographical ideals and insights into life [2]. Unlike traditional accounts of meritorious officials, Sima Qian pays particular attention to their choices and withdrawal after achieving success, especially the life posture of “retiring after success.” Through his careful depiction of their life trajectories, the historian constructs a value dimension that transcends mere utilitarian concerns: while political achievements are certainly significant, what matters even more is how one preserves personal integrity and individual freedom amid the whirlpool of power [5]. From a comparative analytical perspective, Fan Li predominantly exemplifies prudential wisdom grounded in Huang-Lao philosophy, whereas Zhang Liang manifests a philosophy of strategic advancement and retreat that synthesizes Confucian and Daoist thought [6]. From the standpoint of close textual analysis, Sima Qian, through meticulous narrative structuring, the strategic deployment of evaluative commentary, and the integration of aphoristic statements, transforms their decisions into politically emblematic metaphors [2]. Consequently, Fan Li and Zhang Liang are not only vivid historical figures but also serve as crucial entry points for understanding Sima Qian’s historiographical stance and value commitments.

#### 3.1 Fan Li in the Huang-Lao Context

In *Shiji*’s account of King Goujian of Yue, Fan Li’s portrayal is imbued with symbolic significance. He is depicted both as a strategist who aided King Goujian in his

regimen of “sleeping on brushwood and tasting gall” to avenge the humiliation at Kuaiji, and as a sage who fully apprehended the logic of power encapsulated in the proverb, “When the birds are gone, the fine bow is put away; when the hare is dead, the hound is cooked” [2]. After the restoration of the State of Yue, Fan Li resolutely withdrew from political life, adopted a new identity, and amassed considerable wealth through commerce, ultimately achieving a tranquil and honorable end. Through this narrative, Sima Qian constructs Fan Li as an exemplar of strategic prudence and moral integrity.

Underlying this portrayal is the profound influence of the Huang-Lao philosophy that prevailed in the early Han dynasty [6]. The political ethos of the period, characterized by the principle of *wuwei erzhi*—governing through non-interference—finds a vivid embodiment in Fan Li. His graceful withdrawal from the arena of power and his conscious choice to “act in accordance with the times” reflect a philosophical pursuit of inner tranquility and individual freedom. Through this portrayal, Sima Qian expresses his admiration for the Huang-Lao philosophy while simultaneously integrating his own life experience into the narrative [5]. Having endured the humiliation of castration, Sima Qian profoundly understood the fragility of the individual under autocratic power. Consequently, he deeply valued Fan Li’s wisdom in withdrawal, constructing him as an ideal figure who successfully evades the tragic fate of “the hound slain once the hare is killed.” In this sense, Fan Li is not merely a significant historical figure of the Yue state but also a symbolic embodiment of Sima Qian’s reflection on individual freedom and self-preservation.

### 3.2 Zhang Liang in the Context of Political Office

Similar to Fan Li, Zhang Liang’s portrayal in *Shiji* also carries a profound political metaphor [2]. He initially appears as an assassin, attempting to resist the tyranny of the Qin dynasty through violent means. However, during the historical transition from the fall of Qin to the rise of Han, he gradually transforms from “assassin” to “imperial mentor,” employing strategies that allow him to “plan within the command tent and secure victory from a thousand miles away,” ultimately becoming a pivotal figure in the consolidation of early Han rule.

However, Sima Qian’s portrayal of Zhang Liang extends beyond the role of a mere strategist. After assisting Liu Bang in founding the Han dynasty, Zhang Liang voluntarily declined official power, choosing to retire in the manner of “willing to accompany Master Chisong” [2]. This decision reflects not only the Daoist ideal of “achiev-

ing success without claiming credit” but also a profound contemplation of individual destiny.

A comparative reading of Fan Li and Zhang Liang reveals that Sima Qian, through nuanced narrative construction, underscores the philosophical implications of their respective withdrawals from political life. Fan Li exemplifies the Huang-Lao ideal of adapting to circumstance, whereas Zhang Liang synthesizes Confucian loyalty with Daoist detachment [5,6]. Although situated in different historical contexts, both figures respond to the threat of power through the principle of *gong cheng shen tui*—“withdrawing after success.” Through their portrayals, Sima Qian conveys a profound meditation on the intellectual’s fate under autocratic rule: scholars must rely on their talents to achieve merit, yet remain vigilant against the corrosive force of political power. True wisdom, therefore, lies in knowing when to advance and when to retreat, preserving one’s integrity through withdrawal. This mode of characterization serves not only as an allegorical reflection on contemporary politics but also as a projection of the historian’s own existential consciousness [5].

## 4. Reinterpreting Political Metaphors of Fan Li and Zhang Liang in *Zizhi Tongjian*

Unlike *Shiji*, which emphasizes the moral integrity and existential destiny of individuals, *Zizhi Tongjian*—as a manual of governance—focuses more on summarizing and codifying the principles of political rule [3]. In Sima Guang’s historiography, Fan Li and Zhang Liang are endowed with a distinctly instrumental political symbolism. Their words and actions no longer serve as vehicles for personal philosophical reflection, but are instead subsumed into an institutionalized narrative that underscores administrative practice and the hierarchical order between ruler and minister [7].

### 4.1 Fan Li: Strategic Practice and Ministerial Loyalty

In *Shiji* (The Annals of King Goujian of Yue), Sima Qian emphasizes Fan Li’s withdrawal and reclusion after achieving success, as well as his commercial endeavors, highlighting his prudential wisdom and self-preserving acumen [2]. In contrast, in *Zizhi Tongjian*, Sima Guang deliberately downplays these anecdotes, focusing instead on Fan Li’s strategic guidance and loyalty in assisting Goujian to restore the Yue state [3]. By emphasizing his governance strategies and ministerial responsibilities, Fan Li is constructed as a composite exemplar of loyalty and strategic acumen, simultaneously capable of achieving

extraordinary success and upholding ministerial propriety. His portrayal shifts from a practitioner of Huang-Lao wisdom to a facilitator of monarchical authority, redefining his strategic prowess as an instrument within the political order [7]. This narrative reorientation not only redirects the evaluative focus of his character but also positions Fan Li as a didactic model for contemporary scholar-officials, embodying the intertwined virtues of loyalty and sagacious intelligence.

#### 4.2 Zhang Liang: Strategic Norms and the Confucian-ritual Order

Unlike Zhang Liang's dual portrayal in *Shiji*—emphasizing both his strategic brilliance and his withdrawal after achievement—*Zizhi Tongjian* foregrounds his role in institutional development and the maintenance of order [3]. Sima Guang records key actions such as advising Liu Bang to consolidate control over Guanzhong, welcoming the Four Sages to reassure the populace, and recommending the establishment of the crown prince to stabilize the dynasty's foundations, highlighting that Zhang Liang's strategies consistently served the consolidation of imperial ritual and political order. Within this narrative, Zhang Liang is no longer portrayed as a composite figure embodying both Confucian and Daoist sensibilities; rather, he emerges as a guardian of order and a foundational architect of institutional governance [7]. His wisdom is situated within the framework of Confucian ethics and the ruler–minister relationship, reflecting Sima Guang's view that while strategic acumen can serve the state, it must remain constrained by ritual and moral norms. Consequently, in *Zizhi Tongjian*, Zhang Liang functions as a symbol of the political role of scholar-officials—expected not only to possess strategic intelligence but also to operate within the limits of ritual and uphold the primacy of order [3].

Accordingly, compared with their representation in *Shiji*, where Fan Li and Zhang Liang embody “philosophies of life” and individual decision-making, their portrayals in *Zizhi Tongjian* emphasize institutional and instrumental functions [3,7]. They no longer symbolize the exercise of personal freedom amid the turbulence of power; rather, they are integrated into the narrative framework of imperial order and governance logic, serving as exemplars for ministerial conduct and the demonstration of ritualized rule. Through this mode of historiography, Sima Guang fulfills his scholarly mission of “using history as a guide for governance,” transforming these figures into moral exemplars for contemporary scholar-officials and instructive models for imperial administration [3].

### 5. Political Metaphors and Historio-

### graphical Purpose in a Comparative Perspective

A comparative analysis of the portrayals of Fan Li and Zhang Liang reveals the fundamental differences between *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian* in terms of narrative strategies, political metaphors, and historiographical objectives. Through a combination of comparative analysis and close reading, it becomes evident that *Shiji* tends to employ a literary approach to portray individual personalities and life experiences, rendering strategist figures as carriers of political metaphors for personal wisdom and moral choice [2]. In contrast, *Zizhi Tongjian* emphasizes a more codified narrative, situating characters within the framework of state governance and institutional order, with political metaphors highlighting the demonstration of loyalty, intelligence, and ritual in maintaining both political authority and social stability [3]. Thus, the two historical works exhibit mutually reflective yet distinct emphases in both the construction of historical figures and the articulation of historiographical positions.

#### 5.1 Differences in Narrative Orientation and Political Metaphor

In *Shiji*, Sima Qian employs a highly literary narrative approach to construct the images of Fan Li and Zhang Liang, with his writing serving the dual functions of recording historical facts and conveying intellectual reflection. By incorporating anecdotes, metaphors, and philosophical reflections, Sima Qian presents them not merely as participants in historical events but also as embodiments of life philosophy and ideals of personal character [2]. Through his depiction of Fan Li's wisdom in “retiring upon accomplishment” and Zhang Liang's strategic judgment, Sima Qian conveys the potential for individuals to preserve their character and realize personal values amid despotic power and the currents of history, reflecting a profound humanistic concern. In contrast, Sima Guang in *Zizhi Tongjian* centers his writing on political narrative, rendering it increasingly functional and instrumental. Characters are simplified into structural nodes of political events, with their individuality and anecdotes deliberately attenuated to emphasize their political roles as ministers [3]. Sima Guang situates Fan Li and Zhang Liang within the grand framework of state governance and dynastic order, emphasizing the normative role of political virtues such as loyalty, intelligence, and ritual in consolidating authority and maintaining social stability. Accordingly, in *Zizhi Tongjian*, the political metaphors associated with strategist figures shift from the individual survival wisdom emphasized by Sima Qian to the construction of collective order.

Characters no longer function as expressions of independent personality but serve as exemplars of moral conduct for rulers and scholar-officials.

## 5.2 Historical Contexts and the Shaping Influence of Experiences

These differences stem not only from variations in historiographical genre but also from the personal experiences and broader historical context [7]. Living during the transitional period of early Han society and having endured the trauma of castration, Sima Qian infused his writing with reflections on individual fate and tragic consciousness. Consequently, his political metaphors emphasize self-preservation and the transcendence of the spirit under authoritarian power [2]. In contrast, Sima Guang lived during the mid-Northern Song period, confronting political crises and factional disputes, and his writing reflects a strong sense of scholar-official responsibility [3]. *Zizhi Tongjian* functions not merely as a historical work but as a political handbook intended to guide contemporary rulers and scholar-officials. Consequently, the depiction of strategists in Sima Guang's narrative is institutionalized and instrumentalized, serving the practical needs of maintaining dynastic order and promoting political education [3]. In shaping the images of strategists such as Fan Li and Zhang Liang, *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian* respectively exhibit a humanistic concern centered on individualism and an institutionalized construction oriented by Confucian order [7]. This distinction not only reveals the fundamental differences in narrative strategies between the two histories but also reflects how Sima Qian and Sima Guang, shaped by their respective historical contexts and personal experiences, uniquely articulated their historiographical perspectives and value orientations. Through comparative analysis and close textual reading, it is evident that *Shiji* emphasizes the presentation of individual wisdom, moral choice, and lived experience, whereas *Zizhi Tongjian* highlights the illustrative significance of political norms and the maintenance of order. Together, these approaches constitute two mutually reflective yet distinct modes of historiographical expression.

## 6. Conclusion

This study focuses on Fan Li and Zhang Liang and employs the perspective of "political metaphor" alongside a comparative historiographical approach to analyze the depiction of these figures in *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian*. The findings indicate significant differences between the two histories in terms of character construction, narrative strategy, and historiographical purpose. In *Shiji*, Sima Qian employs a literary narrative to endow characters with

vivid individuality, rendering Fan Li and Zhang Liang not only participants in historical events but also embodiments of moral ideals and life philosophy. In contrast, in *Zizhi Tongjian*, Sima Guang functionalizes and institutionalizes these figures, emphasizing their political roles as ministers and their didactic function for governance, highlighting the importance of political virtues such as loyalty, wisdom, and propriety in maintaining state authority and social order. Consequently, it can be concluded that Sima Qian's historiography reflects a pursuit of individual spirit and moral ideals, whereas Sima Guang's writing serves the principles of governance and institutional instruction. Together, they exemplify the two predominant approaches in Chinese historiographical tradition: the integration of literary artistry with historical narrative and the use of history as a guide for political governance.

The scholarly significance of this study lies in providing a new framework for understanding the multifaceted functions of strategists in the works of ancient historians. It also deepens the understanding of the literary and intellectual dimensions of *Shiji* as well as the political and didactic functions of *Zizhi Tongjian*, offering a valuable reference for future cross-textual and historiographical studies of historical figures. A limitation of this study lies in its exclusive focus on Fan Li and Zhang Liang as case studies, relying primarily on a comparative textual approach. It does not fully address other strategist figures or explore their reception and cultural representation in subsequent periods.

Future research could be further expanded in two directions. First, by broadening the range of historical figures, a more comprehensive prosopography of strategists in Chinese historiography could be constructed. Second, by incorporating reception history or cross-cultural perspectives, scholars could examine the subsequent reinterpretation and transformation of figures such as Fan Li and Zhang Liang in later political discourse and cultural memory, thereby offering deeper insights into the historiographical value of *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian* and their influence within the broader Chinese intellectual tradition.

## References

- [1] Zuo Q. Guoyu. Yishu Zhongguo Wang, 2000.
- [2] Sima Q, Xie B. *Shiji*. Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 2020.
- [3] Sima G. *Zizhi Tongjian* (Vol. 1, No. 9: 56). Zhonghua Shuju, 1991.
- [4] Che M M. A comparative study of the depiction of strategists in *Shiji* and *Zizhi Tongjian* (Master's thesis, Lanzhou University). 2023.
- [5] Zhang Y C. A re-examination of Sima Qian's historical view. *Hebei Xuekan*, 2023, 43(6): 218–224.

- [6] Han Z, Chen X. Huang-Lao thought and Fan Li and Zhang Liang in Shiji. *Wenshi Zhishi*, 2000, (3): 6.
- [7] Bai N. Similarities and differences between the thoughts of Sima Qian and Sima Guang. *Jilin Guangbo Dian Shi Da Xue Xuebao*, 2015, (5): 151–152.
- [8] Strange M. The construction of Zi Zhi Tong Jian’s imperial vision: Sima Guang on the Southern and Northern Dynasties. University of Oxford, 2008.
- [9] Watson B (Trans.). *Records of the Grand Historian / Shiji* (Vols. I–III). Columbia University Press, 1993.
- [10] Zhang J. A study on Sima Qian’s view of life and death and the principles and influence of his writing. *Communications in Humanities Research*, 2023, 11: 125–129.