

## CHAPTER IV

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### Relating the Past

#### *Writing (and Rewriting) History*

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In China the study of history has long been celebrated as an essential component of effective governance. History was a “mirror” for the ruler, but also a rich source of models of proper behavior for all: filial sons and daughters, ministers of state, monks, merchants, etc. Imperial governments consistently supported the collection of documents and oversaw the crafting of dynastic histories; at the same time, private scholars might write their own alternative histories as challenges to the state and its historical orthodoxy. In India history was rarely honored as a distinct category of fact-based study or writing, yet Indians did not lack historical imagination. They simply expressed this imagination in different forms and—given the enormous linguistic diversity of the subcontinent—languages. Some rulers of the many separate states of India had their dynastic achievements cut in rock inscriptions. The literati who recorded the past often gave historical events a literary form, weaving together fact and fiction, thereby revealing a conception of history and the writing of history—that is, a historiographical vision—very different from that embraced in either China or the West.

As different as the Indian and Chinese historiographical traditions are, there are nonetheless some points of similarity. Surely there is no merit in the stark contrast drawn by the German philosopher Georg Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) between the “rational” and “prosaic” Chinese, who, living under the guidance of a strong state, were naturally drawn to historical

thinking, and the unruly Hindus, who, given to extreme flights of fancy, supposedly produced no history. Of course the idea that “Hindus have no history” requires serious reevaluation, but it is also a mistake to assume that China’s historiographical tradition was any more “rational” than other national/cultural traditions.

Hegel’s comment, born of his imperfect knowledge of both India and China and his Eurocentric bias, alerts us, further, to the dangers of judging one culture’s historiographical vision by the yardstick of another’s view of what history is. Berating Indians for failing to think about history the way the Chinese did adds little to our understanding of the meaning of history in either culture. So too, assuming that history writing in either (or any) culture ought to “measure up” to “modern” standards for the practice of history—the second error that Hegel made—confounds any efforts to comprehend the ways history was used in China and India. Like all cultures, China and India have for centuries been thinking about, using, and reinventing their pasts, but neither has fashioned its histories in conformity to the standards of modern historiography, which were developed in the West in the nineteenth century and now dominate the practice of history throughout the world. This chapter explores how Chinese and Indians “did” history on their own—very different—terms.

### Differences: Linguistic, Cultural, and Political

It is perhaps best to start with the factors that created difference.

The first thing to stress about textualizations of India’s past is their diversity. The country boasts more than a dozen major languages with historical traditions stretching back centuries and in some cases millennia. Sanskrit was the principal pan-Indic language of letters in the ancient world, and this continued through the end of the first millennium. The later medieval and early modern periods saw the rise of vernacular languages that were more specific to regions (an analogy with Europe would be the shift from Latin to Romance languages). Muslim dynasties with an affinity for Persian culture began to hold sway in north India by the early thirteenth century, bringing further complexities to this linguistic picture. Grappling with Indian history means grappling with multiplicity.

China, in contrast, enjoyed, relatively speaking, a greater degree of linguistic unity and political continuity. Literary or classical Chinese, although

it certainly changed significantly over time, served as a written lingua franca from roughly the third century to the early twentieth century; at the very least it enabled widespread textual communication (despite the enormous diversity of spoken languages and dialects) among the educated elite. Most histories were written in this language. And, although China suffered its share of invasions—most notably during the “period of disunion” (third century to late sixth century), when a succession of conquerors took north China; in the thirteenth century, when the Mongols founded the Yuan dynasty; and the seventeenth century, when the Manchus established the Qing—the conquerors adopted many of the political institutions and cultural practices of the Chinese, lending some degree of continuity even to these periods of foreign conquest.

It would be dangerous to exaggerate this linguistic unity and political and cultural continuity. Many fall into the trap, accepting the current nationalistic assertion of the existence of a single, coherent “China” from time immemorial—when in fact sharp regional, economic, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural differences repeatedly threatened the unity of even the most solidly “Chinese” empires. But there is no question that, compared to India, China enjoyed a more unified cultural and political tradition. It also enjoyed—in another sharp contrast with India—a long *written* historical tradition. Writing developed very early in Chinese history. It first appeared on oracle bones in the second millennium BCE; these served both as tools of divination and, once the divination was completed and recorded on the bone, as the archives of the Shang state.

Indian history was less dependent on writing, particularly in the early centuries. The first Indian historians weren’t writers at all. Accounts of the civilizational attainments of ancient India often begin with the four Vedas (lit. “knowledge”), a tradition of Sanskrit cosmological and ritual lore though also, arguably, historical lore that, like the Shang oracle bones of China, originated in the second millennium BCE. The Vedas preserve fragmentary genealogies of ancestors and accounts of sacrificial and other activities in the “Land of the Five Rivers” (now the Punjab region of northwestern India). Traces of the past as found in Vedic literature were viewed as an important model for ritual behavior. “Now, Indrota Daivapa Sounaka once performed this sacrifice for Janamejaya Parikṣita,” runs a typical instance, “and by performing it he extinguished all evil-doing” (trans. Julius Eggeling). Later participants in Vedic culture were prompted by such stories—so runs the theory—to engage in the same sacrificial activity, and

in so doing they connected to their past. But nobody felt the need to write any of this “history” down. For one thing, writing did not yet exist in India. Most Vedic texts were not committed to writing until the late medieval period; instead, they constituted an oral archive to be transmitted exclusively by Brahmins—traditional India’s learned class—through sophisticated recitation practices that continue right down to the present day.

The writing of history was much more prevalent in early Chinese society than it was in India. We can trace its changing technology with some precision. The earliest “histories”—terse chronological accounts of the major events and rituals of the different states of the North China Plain—were probably written by official scribes on bamboo strips, tied together to form a scroll. By the sixth century BCE, silk was also in use, and by the end of the second century CE at the latest, paper had become a popular medium. Writing, as has been noted, is not a prerequisite for historical thinking—oral cultures do have history—but it doubtless provides a handy tool for record keeping and thus the writing of history. Several centuries later, the invention of woodblock printing made the rapid reproduction of texts—and the spread of knowledge and sources for the writing of history—even easier.

But in another way—in its identification with cosmology and ritual—the practice of history in early China was quite similar to that in India. The first Chinese historians were charged with reading the patterns of the heavens through divination and ordering the ruler’s sacrifices in harmony with those patterns. The chronologically arranged annals of their observations and activities—in other words, their histories—traced the interrelationship between Heaven and human affairs, particularly as it was mediated through the figure of the king and his ritual performances. Confucius (551–479 BCE) himself was to some extent heir to this tradition, as he hoped to replicate in his day the perfect order of the past, specifically that of the early Zhou dynasty (c. 1045–722 BCE)—the time, in his view, when virtue ruled, every man and woman knew his or her place, and strict observance of ritual created harmony between Heaven and earth.

## The Earliest Histories

The Chinese pride themselves on their long historical tradition, pointing—though not entirely accurately—to their “five thousand years of uninterrupted history” and to the role that diviners cum historians played even in

China's first dynasty, the Shang (sixteenth century–c. 1045 BCE). The character that came to mean history (and is part of the modern Chinese term for history) first appeared on Shang oracle bones. Very early China produced several self-conscious records of the past, each suggesting a distinctive understanding of the meaning and uses of history. History in the conventional sense is harder to find in early India; in fact, in contrast to the Chinese, early Indians did not develop a separate category of writing identified as such. The nature of early historical consciousness has to be sought in oral tradition, inscriptions, epics, and other lore, as well as in biographical poetry.

### *Classical India—Edicts and Epics*

While Vedic culture was wholly oral, the advent of writing in India enabled new traditions of rock-cut inscriptions and signs of a recognizably historical impulse, even if nobody cared to coin a name for it. The great emperor Ashoka (r. 268–233 BCE) has often been associated with the first use of writing in India. His early warmongering acts as a king caused immense bloodshed, which he later regretted. In fact, Ashoka's grief over the carnage led him to convert to Buddhism and publicly embrace nonviolence. His famous rock edicts propagated messages both royal and religious throughout the far reaches of the subcontinent. This excerpt from rock edict XIII shows various recognizable historical markers, such as a recording of the emperor's regnal year and a concern to enumerate the dead while at the same time propagating a distinctively Buddhist message of dharma (committing to a morally upright life) and compassion. Note the remorse of the emperor (Priyadarshi is an honorific title that suggests the emperor's magnanimous gaze upon his realm) at the conquering of Kalinga in eastern India:

The Kalinga country was conquered by King Priyadarshi [Ashoka], Beloved of the Gods, in the eighth year of his reign. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were carried away captive, one hundred thousand were slain, and many times that number died. Immediately after the Kalingas had been conquered, King Priyadarshi became intensely devoted to the study of Dharma, to the love of Dharma, and to the inculcation of Dharma. The Beloved of the Gods, conqueror

of the Kalingas, is moved to remorse now. For he has felt profound sorrow and regret because the conquest of a people previously unconquered involves slaughter, death, and deportation. (trans. Narayanrao Appurao Nikam and Richard McKeon)

Inscriptions would become one of the most powerful vehicles for historical expression in India. And with the new medium of writing came an avalanche of textual expression in the subcontinent. First were the epics.

Much has been made of India's purported lack of history. A lot hinges on terminology and modernist presumptions about the very category. The modern word for history in many Indian languages derives from the Sanskrit word *itihāsa* (*iti ha āsa*, "and so it was"), the genre designator of India's two great epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (composed roughly between 400 BCE and 200 CE). The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are deeply influential texts that encoded some sense of past-ness for Indians over two millennia. The *Mahabharata* is the great story of the "Bharata" people, from whom Indians considered themselves to have descended after most of human society was wiped out in a cataclysmic war. (A common word for India in modern South Asian languages is "Bharat.") The *Ramayana*, for its part, is the story of the travails of the revered Lord Rama, an exemplary king.

These works of *itihasa* are both more and less than history. Indian epics are encyclopedic and contain many digressions and side notes on a whole range of topics. They are often deeply political texts that grapple incisively with the nature of kingship, the moral order, and the conditions of possibility of civilization itself. Good rule was perceived to be connected to the rectitude of the ruler, and the epics contain long didactic passages on governance and righteousness. As is often the case in this genre, the characters are larger than life. The *Mahabharata* hero Yudhisthira was the son of Dharma or virtue. And the paradigmatic expression for just rule in Classical India was "Rama-rajya," the rule of Rama. India's *itihisas* also betray more than a whiff of the fantastical and would thus fail many diagnostic tests of today's discipline of history. The *Ramayana* in particular has always been celebrated as India's first work of literature, an early signal that in this thought-world history was deeply inflected by a strong literary impulse. The time frames are also hard to reconcile with historicist frameworks. Although the Classical Indian epics are understood to have taken place in specific

*yugas* or time periods, these were not the same as the ones that humans were currently felt to inhabit. The epic idea of time was cyclical, not linear, since every so often the creator god Brahma awakens from his slumbers to restart cosmic time. In this typical Hindu cosmological imagining, the entire world is destroyed periodically and then created afresh. Everything is recursive. History quite literally repeats itself.

Such conceptualizations of time may be radically different from modern historical perspectives but, like the related genre of the *purana* (“ancient lore”), these powerful stories were for a very long time carriers of the Indian past that were told and retold over many generations. In the *Arthashastra* (c. 100 BCE–100 CE), an authoritative Sanskrit treatise on political life, kings were enjoined to study *itihasa* and *purana*, and later sober-minded historians such as Kalhana (twelfth century) established their chronologies starting from the supposed date of the *Mahabharata* war. In India the conjoint term *itihasa-purana* has sometimes been used to designate the earliest layer of history. *Puranas*, like biblical stories, deal with creation, primordial ancestors, royal genealogy, and the exploits of legendary heroes, sages, and kings. They interweave historical material with something closer to what we would call myth (though Indians, tellingly, have no word for the genre and thus for stories that may be paradigmatically but not empirically true), presenting a record of human society that sees itself as deeply connected to spheres of enchantment controlled by divine mandate. (The same is often said of the Homeric worldview of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the epitome of history-as-literature that created a cultural framework for ancient Greece and is commonly considered the foundation of Western literature.) Often lengthy and prone to digression, the *puranas* recount not only human history but also the narratives of Shiva, Vishnu, and the numerous other deities who populate the Hindu pantheon. Historical records were also likely to be focused on kings.

The early centuries of the Common Era saw a proliferation of inscriptions issued by Indian royal houses. They were primarily used to record donations to communities or temples, but at the same time they were platforms for the proclamations of a king, as with Ashoka, or for articulating the historical shape of a dynasty and even, on occasion, for setting the record straight. The Chalukyas (c. 500–750), one of the most influential Indian dynasties, cultivated an extraordinary historiographical tradition in inscriptional form, often (though not always) in prose. Court historians would recount the great deeds and generosity of ruling kings in the prefaces to



stone-carved grants—legal records of official gifts. A typical example from a Chalukyan grant of King Vinayaditya I, precisely dated to the “Scythian Year” 604 (682 CE):

With cleverness and daring alone he recovered the vast, full royal power that his clan customarily held. He illuminated the quarters of heaven with the variegated, golden white banner of his fame acquired by his defeat of enemy kings who came before him in battle. He took Kanchi (a capital city in South India) directly after defeating the king of the Pallavas, whose conquest had marked the decline of the men of a dynasty spotless as moonbeams. (trans. Sheldon Pollock)

The inscription goes on to compare the Chalukyan king to, among others, Yudhisthira and Bharata of *Mahabharata* fame. Since these proclamations were carved into the very landscape, later court historians would read earlier inscriptions—sometimes traveling to distant temple sites where they were affixed—in order to establish or confirm the historical record. History was, in this sense, a deeply decentralized affair. The contrast with China would be difficult to overstate. Instead of entering the protected halls of a vast state-controlled history office where archives dating back centuries were meticulously kept, an Indian scholar might be expected to roam for miles, combing the hillsides in order to find sporadic references to the dynasties of the past.

*Two Models for History in Classical China:  
The Topical and the Chronicle*

A few centuries before India’s epic and inscriptional traditions were evolving, Chinese were composing histories—although they too contained elements of the fantastic—much more grounded in the nitty-gritty of human politics and society. Yet they also very much engaged in reflection on the nature of kingship and the relationship between moral order and human society, concerns that preoccupied Indian writers as well. During this period, two very different works of history were produced in China: *Historical Documents* (*Shangshu*) and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*). Each of these books was eventually designated a Classic (*jing*)—that is, they became part of a core group of works interpreted as expressions of the



fundamental cosmological, ethical, and political principles of Chinese culture. *Historical Documents*, as its title suggests, is not a chronological history but rather a collection of documents and pronouncements (varying widely in authenticity, though some date to the eleventh century BCE) that set forth the principles of rulership and the moral standards that were to guide political ideology for the next thirty centuries. The foundational concept of the “Mandate of Heaven”—the belief that Heaven grants kingship only to men of proven virtue—is first explained in this work, for example; and its accounts of China’s earliest sage-kings and their well-ordered societies, though mythical, provided the models (and the rhetorical flourishes) for later kings and emperors.

The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is a very different sort of history. A chronicle of events in the feudal states of the Central China Plain from the years 722 to 481 BCE, it was written in the compacted, laconic “ritual style” of the earlier annalistic writings—yearly chronicles—that comprised simple notices of battles, royal successions, alliances, and unusual nature phenomena. The work does not appear to offer opportunities for reflection on rulership or ethics. But one tradition of interpretation found hidden meanings: it was argued that Confucius, the work’s supposed author, had concealed his judgment of historical events in the terse prose of the *Annals*. Exacting analysis of the text’s vocabulary and word order, the titles and proper names employed, and the designation of dates and times, it was believed, would reveal Confucius’s “praise and blame” of the feudal rulers—and therefore his vision of correct governance.

The events recorded so sparsely in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* were soon fleshed out and elaborated in a companion text, the *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuozhuan*), which, though it probably originated as an independent chronicle, came to be seen as a commentary on the *Annals*. It provides a rich and detailed narrative fully grounded in human action, often interrupted by direct speech. Where the *Spring and Autumn Annals* reports simply, in nine characters, “In summer [721 BCE], in the fifth month, the earl of Zheng overcame Duan in Yan,” the *Zuo Commentary* provides a long—541 characters—and exciting story of family hatred and betrayal (Duan was the earl’s younger brother and the favorite of their mother, who schemed to ensure that Duan supplanted him as ruler). It can also be considered a work of ethics: a lesson on good rulership (the earl was able to defeat Duan in part because Duan oppressed his people); and an exemplary display of filial piety and familial love (the earl and his mother are reconciled in the end).

*Historical Documents* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (with the *Zuo Commentary*) established two different models—the topical and the chronological—that deeply influenced all later history writing and inspired much debate over the advantages and drawbacks of each form. But the texts share some characteristics that distinguish them clearly from the early histories of India. To be sure, there is the same interest in the principles of good rulership as we find in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. But in the Chinese works this interest is grounded in “real”—that is to say, human—time (not the *yugas* or cosmic cycles of the Indian epics) and expressed in quite concrete narratives of “real” rulers. As Confucius is reputed to have said about the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, “I have relied upon actual affairs and added the mind of a true king to them. I think to reveal them in theoretical words is not as profound and clear as in actual affairs” (trans. Stephen W. Durrant).

### *Biography in Early China and India*

This orientation toward actual affairs, coupled with the faith that humans interacted with the cosmos to make history, early ensured that biography, particularly biographies of rulers, officials, and important political figures, became central to the Chinese historiographical tradition. As, over time, the faith in a responsive cosmos faded and human actions came to be seen as the primary drivers of history, biography became the primary vehicle for the expression of historical judgments. Although he did not invent biographical writing, Sima Qian (145–86? BCE) was the first historian to identify “exemplary lives” (*liezhuan*) as a separate genre of historical writing. *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, his monumental history of China from the beginnings of time to the late 2nd century BCE, combines a variety of historical genres (annals, chronological tables, genealogies of hereditary houses, topical treatises) with biographies, establishing the form for all later standard histories. But the biographies stand out. Sima Qian often appends his own judgments (“the grand historian comments . . .”) at the end, as in the following assessment of Xiang Yu, the aristocratic rebel leader who failed to establish a new dynasty after the fall of the Qin in 207 BCE:

He boasted and made a show of his own achievements. He was obstinate in his own opinions and did not abide by established

ways. He thought to make himself a dictator, hoping to attack and rule the empire by force. Yet within five years he was dead and his kingdom lost. He met death at Tongcheng, but even at that time he did not wake to or accept responsibility for his errors. “It is Heaven,” he declared, “which has destroyed me, and no fault of mine in the use of arms!” Was he not indeed deluded? (trans. Burton Watson)

Sima Qian’s evaluations are often much more subtly and artfully rendered. His group biography of assassins, which is analyzed in some detail in chapter 4, conveys a narrative of change—the deterioration of a code of honor in the face of rising *realpolitik*—through the juxtaposition of a series of biographies of increasingly inept assassins. Indeed, Sima Qian often frustrates the reader hoping to find clear-cut “praise and blame” judgments of the sort attributed to Confucius in his compilation of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Even today scholars cannot agree on how he evaluates the wealthy men discussed in his “Biographies of Money-makers”: does Sima Qian, a free-market enthusiast, admire these men for their drive and ingenuity in turning profits? Or is he, like a good Confucian, excoriating them for their willingness to do anything—rob graves, trade in dried sheep stomachs, etc.—to make money? This ambiguity troubled later historians; although much admired and much read for his fine prose style, Sima Qian was also much criticized, particularly during the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, when a heavily Confucianized historiography had become the model, for his failure to embrace the moralizing approach heralded in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

Biography plays a central role in Classical Indian historical expression as well, but with one major difference: biography was usually hagiography. Indian biographies, known as *carita*, were not to be written about just anybody: only great men merited them. One was the Buddha. Ashvaghosha’s *Buddhacarita* (c. second century CE), among the earliest works of classical Sanskrit literature, tells the story of Prince Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), who famously turned away from the world at a young age and adopted an ascetic lifestyle in the search for truth. Written long after the Buddha had died (probably in the fifth century BCE), it contains both lofty praise and moral instruction, celebrating the greatness of a spiritual teacher while simultaneously propounding the tenets of a proselytizing

religion. This passage from the scene of the Buddha's birth in the opening canto illustrates the reverential tone:

He will rescue with the mighty boat of knowledge this stricken world  
carried away by the current. . . . Upon men in this world who are  
being scorched by the fire of passion, whose fuel is the objects of the  
senses, he'll pour relief with the rain of dharma, like a rain cloud  
pouring down rain, at the end of the summer heat. (trans. Patrick  
Olivelle)

Kings too were considered worthy of the *carita* genre. Exemplary is Bana's *Harsa-carita* (seventh century), written to honor Harshavardhana (r. 606–647), the ruler of Kanauj in central India. Both the Buddha and Harsha are demonstrably historical figures, which gives these works a different character from much of the *itihasa-purana* enterprise. Bana even tells something of his own story, adding autobiography to the mix. It would be difficult to reconstruct a full account of the reign of Harsha or his times from the *Harsa-carita*, however. Bana was not so much concerned with chronology as with sequencing events—like a writer of fiction would construct a plot—in order to demonstrate how Harsha's own personal charisma had led him to greatness. Kings were idealized figures. They were larger than life, and approaches to their biographies reflect this deeply.

Writing a *carita* on occasion even required some extraordinary fact bending. For instance, when princes violated the rules of primogeniture, where the eldest son is successor to the father, the matter of succession had to be handled with great delicacy, even creativity. This was the case with Harshavardhana, who had usurped the throne of Kanauj from his brother; another celebrated usurper (and fratricide) was famously eulogized by Bilhana in his *Vikramanka-deva-carita* (late eleventh century). Who better than a poet, rather than a fact-mongering historian, to make the case for the new king? Classical Indian poets considered themselves indispensable to rulers because they were responsible for perpetuating the memory of a dynasty in the written record. Poetry, they felt, acted as a mirror in which the fame of a king could be eternally reflected for the generations to come. Court writers were also public relations officers. Just kingship was the ideal, yet most historians were constrained to write from the point of view of the court, no matter how unjust the current king. Their role was not to apportion “praise and blame” in the manner of the ideal Chinese historian,

but to shape and disseminate the ideology of the court. Blame, when it was apportioned, was either very subtle or more pointedly directed at previous dynasties. The current king was axiomatically perfect—or such was the logic of the *carita* genre.

But one work from this period does stand out as a work of critical history: Kalhana's *Raja-tarangini* (*River of Kings*, c. 1150), written in Bilhana's homeland of Kashmir during a period of remarkable intellectual ferment. Kalhana was working in a local tradition that superbly combined historiographical inquiry with poetic craftsmanship; again, these were not separate genres (and he clearly labels his historical work a *kavya*, or poem). Still, *River of Kings* stands apart from earlier *caritas* because of Kalhana's approach. He mentions his sources in the opening of the work and pauses to criticize several of his predecessors on both factual and literary grounds. He also records with unprecedented detail and an almost modernist cynicism the fraught political history of Kashmir.

## History and the State

It is possible to identify a few striking similarities between the early Indian and Chinese historiographical traditions. Both are grounded at the start in assumptions about the cosmological significance and ritual importance of history. Historical texts transmit notions about the moral responsibilities of rulership that long shaped the rhetoric—if not the actual practice—of governance; interestingly, both traditions shared the notion that history (or in the case of India, literature) served as a mirror to the ruler. Both favored biography as a vehicle of history. And in both traditions, the literary qualities of historical writing were valued: in India literature *was* history, and in China historical works came to have canonical status as treasured classics.

Equally powerful, however, are the differences. In early India, history did not enjoy independent bibliographical status, and the documentary impulse was much weaker than in China. Inscriptions were an important means of recording events, but much of history was truly literature, written as poetry (either epic or *carita*), not prose, as in China. Early Indians did not, as a rule, see records as vital to the workings of the state. Nor did court writers make the claim to be arbiters of political virtue, as Chinese historians did; their role was to glorify the achievements of their royal patrons.

But, although Chinese court historians did not necessarily devote themselves to the production of hagiographical biographies of their rulers, they had other means of promoting the legitimacy of new dynasties and new rulers. From the seventh century on, one of their most important duties was the compilation of a history of the previous dynasty, a “standard” or dynastic history, modeled in form on Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*, that would explain the failings of the predecessor dynasty and the virtue and wisdom that allowed the current dynastic line to capture the “Mandate of Heaven.” In shaping the narrative of dynastic succession, the Chinese imperial governments recognized and exploited the ideological value of history. (They also made it much easier for historians to practice “praise and blame” because, as in India, it was quite safe to “blame” the rulers of previous dynasties for their failings—indeed, that was one of the points of the endeavor.) They were also, of course, providing records of the previous government for current official use, an essential function in a highly bureaucratized state.

For the standard or dynastic histories relied on—and in turn encouraged the maintenance of—a mass of documents and digests compiled by the archivists and historians of the previous dynasty. From 629 on, the recording and collection of documents were the responsibility of officials working in a newly established History Office. This office produced an impressive volume of material: court diaries (chronological accounts of the official business conducted in daily court sessions), records of current government (confidential documents compiled under the supervision of the different ministers), daily calendars (a condensation of court diaries and records of current government), biographical data, and the Veritable Records (annals of the official activities of the previous ruler in a dynasty, compiled from the court diaries, records of current government, and daily calendars kept under his reign). Thus, the compilers of the standard histories had a vast amount of material to work from, and they worked through it with widely varying degrees of dedication and skill. The worst of the standard histories are little more than voluminous cut-and-paste jobs, excerpts from the mass of documents cobbled together by committees of officials. The best are considered among the masterpieces of classical writing. It is unlikely that any but the best were regularly read, although they were kept at court and doubtless used as documentary references.

The documentary-rich foundation of the Chinese imperial state encouraged close imperial oversight—and interference—not so much in the

writing of the standard histories (although such interference was certainly not uncommon) as in the record keeping of the current dynasty. To provide just one of many examples: the Yongle emperor (r. 1402–24) of the Ming dynasty, who had usurped the throne from his nephew, saw to it that the Veritable Records of his father, the founder of the dynasty, were rewritten—no fewer than three times—to strengthen his claim to legitimacy; among other falsehoods, he claimed that his mother was the chief consort of the founder. Although the method was different, as during the reign of the Indian monarch Harshavardhana, historians occasionally had to engage in some extraordinary fact bending to please their demanding employers.

Nonetheless, the relationship between the Chinese state and the historian (or record keeper) was one of ambivalence and much potential tension—and in this sense starkly different from that in India during the classical age. Doubtless the concerns of a powerful emperor to assert his legitimacy or burnish his legacy created pressure on the officials in the History Office and other court historians, who may have had little recourse but to “help him shape and disseminate the ideology of the court.” Yet at the same time, the historian, the arbiter of “praise and blame” according to the early historiographical tradition, could claim a moral authority and far-ranging judgment that qualified him, like Confucius himself, to evaluate even the mightiest of rulers. History was a “mirror to the ruler”—and the historian held the mirror. Sima Guang (1019–1086), an official (but not an official historian) of the Song dynasty, reminded the ruler of this fact in the very title of his work, *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* (*Zizhi tongjian*). Throughout the text he drives the message home: all of the almost three hundred chapters end with a series of judgments addressed to the emperor: “Your servant Guang is of the opinion. . . .” Repeatedly he links the moral qualities of the ruler and his officials to the state of the empire, embracing the conventional Confucian faith that good governance depends on the ruler’s virtue.

But his narrative is designed to emphasize a practical political message as well: quite simply, the beginning and end dates of the *Comprehensive Mirror* reveal what Sima Guang wants the ruler to see in his “mirror.” 403 BCE, when the weak Zhou king ceded power to a regional strongman, marks the beginning of the decline of the great Zhou dynasty; 959 CE marks the eve of the founding of the Song dynasty, the reunification of China under the leadership of a strong ruler, Zhao Kuangyin (r. 960–76). The pointed contrast delivers Sima Guang’s message: the emperor was to



“mirror” the strong ruler, the founder of his dynasty. Remarkably, for much of the time that Sima Guang was working on his history—with the permission of the emperor—he was also leading the opposition to the reform program endorsed by that same emperor.

Whether functioning as a mirror for the ruler or as a vehicle for political legitimization, history writing in China was seen as the responsibility of the state. The very language of officialdom relied on it: policies were justified by historical precedents and political positions summarized in historical allusions. The determination with which certain rulers pressed their own versions of the past—as well as the quickness of dissenting officials and scholars to turn to historical narratives to express political criticism—reveals the firmness of the belief in the bond between history and political order.

No such bond existed in India. History was irrelevant to the functioning of the state. Rulers—at least until the early modern period—were manifestly uninterested in collecting or preserving large volumes of data. This is a conspicuous difference between the two societies.

## Changing Political and Historical Cultures

History writing in India and China in roughly the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries underwent some changes and also followed very different paths. In India, new political developments prompted the spread of different conceptions of history and transformed and strengthened the relationship between historians and the state. In China, however, as official historiography entered a period of decline, there was a proliferation of unofficial histories and an expansion in the understanding of the suitable subjects of history. In both cultures, new dynasties of foreign rulers reshaped the central concerns of historians, both official and private.

### *Persian Historiography and India's New Political Dispensations*

Not long after Kalhana was writing *River of Kings* in the far northwest of the subcontinent, Turkic Muslims established themselves to the south in the Gangetic plain in a political formation that would later come to be known as the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526). The language of high culture

of the new rulers was Persian, which introduced new protocols of courtiers, court poetry, and elite learning as well as sophisticated structures of government administration to the expanding reaches of Islamic society. The Arab conquest of the Persian Empire in 651 had given an impetus to the eastward spread of Islam toward Central and South Asia. A fusion of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic traditions brought additional genres and perspectives to Indian historiography.

The Muslim nobility of India engaged with a variety of texts from the greater Islamic world. Advice literature was especially popular among the courtiers and kings who drew inspiration from Persian culture. These texts often combine historical inquiry with political theory. Advice genres like *akhlaq*, or mirrors for princes—a genre that took the form of annalistic history in China—provide insight into how India’s Islamic dynasties responded to cultural, religious, and political difference. Shari’a (Muslim law) was a subject of considerable negotiation in India, where Muslims were never a majority. Persian texts from beyond India, like the thirteenth-century *Nasirian Ethics* of the Azerbaijani author Tusi (who dedicated the book to an Ismaili ruler who also had to confront the problem of religious difference), provided the theoretical foundation for more inclusive policies.

The Perso-Arabic genre most readily equated with the English term “history” is *tarikh* (chronicle). The *tarikh*, like the Indic *carita*, may be associated with a particular ruler. One of the most famous chronicles of the Delhi Sultanate is Zia al-Din Barani’s *Tarikh-i firoz shahi* (1357), which concerns the reign of Firoz Shah Tughlak (r. 1351–88). Barani speaks eloquently about the genre of history writing, which he considers the very highest form of learning. This was a view that never would have been defended previously in India, where poetry was preeminent, and to the extent that it served as history was concerned with timeless, paradigmatic truths rather than quotidian facts. One of history’s many benefits was its ability to instill good character (for instance in a sultan), a view, we have seen, embraced by Confucian Chinese historians hoping to provide models or “mirrors” of proper governance and ethical conduct to their rulers. For Barani, who also wrote advice literature, history was closely aligned with the principles of Sunni Islam, and ultimately only Muslim historians could be trusted.

The later Mughal period (1526–1857) saw a whole cluster of emperor-specific texts. Two Mughal chronicles, the *Baburnama* (*Account of Babur*) and *Jahangir-nama* (*Account of Jahangir*), were autobiographies, among the very first

in the Islamic world. The self-narrative of Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty (anomalously written in a dialect of Turkish, his native language, rather than in Persian), tells the story of a prince on the run from Central Asia who finally succeeded in conquering India four years before his death, in 1526. Both Babur's and Jahangir's accounts proceed chronologically and capture a wealth of important diplomatic and military details as well as the more random and incidental moments in daily life, including what often seems like the ingestion of a surprising amount of intoxicants. A fairly typical entry from the diarylike *Jahangir-nama* reads as follows:

On the eve of Saturday the twenty-first [corresponds to December 3, 1620] the forward camp set out under good auspices in the direction of Agra [a Mughal capital]. Barqandaz Khan was assigned the post of supervisor of the arsenal of the Deccan [southern] army. Shaykh Ishaq was assigned to Kangra [district in the north]. Allahdad Khan Afghan's brothers were released from prison and given an award of a thousand rupees. I sent two white falcons as a gift to [the emperor Jahangir's son] Khurram.

On Thursday the twenty-sixth [December 8] a wine party was held as usual, and the gifts from the ruler of Iran that he had sent with Zaynal Beg were presented for my inspection. I gave Sultan-Husayn of Pakhli an elephant. (trans. Wheeler M. Thackston)

As a rule, Persian chronicles conform more to conventional notions of history than their classical Indic counterparts. Most *tarikḥ* writers adopt a chronological perspective, even if their unit is the year of the current sultan's reign. Some Persian texts show annalistic features, recording the day-to-day proceedings of the court (*roznama*) in a fashion somewhat reminiscent of the Veritable Records kept at Chinese courts. There are often incidental references to the period's prominent nobility, both Muslim and Hindu, and many take stock of the past from a comprehensive, *longue durée* (long-term) perspective. Dates are given; competing evidence is weighed. Such easily recognizable historiographical concerns and techniques would mean that unlike writings in Sanskrit, the Indo-Persian sources were widely viewed as a legitimate tradition of history writing in the nineteenth century, when modern notions of history began to hold sway.

And yet panegyric (praise) and didacticism (imparting lessons)—often seen as flaws in the more “Hindu” approaches to the past—were

demonstrably part of the Persian tradition as well. Like the writers of *caritas*, chroniclers always praised their sultans. Moreover, in Sultanate and Mughal-period India no less than in classical times, the legitimacy of rulers was generally based on perceived divine sanction. In his rock-cut inscriptions, the emperor Ashoka introduced himself as “the beloved of the gods,” and in fact most Classical Indian kings considered themselves imbued with a portion of divinity. Abu al-Fazl, author of the *Akbarnama* (*Account of Akbar*), presented his patron as a perfected man connected to the divine presence, aided in part by the norms of a Persian textual culture that was often overlaid with Sufi tropes:

Heavenly in appearance, he is an earth of stability;  
possessor of universal intelligence, Jalaluddin [glory of the faith].  
Light of the sun of essence and shadow of God, jewel of  
the crown and throne, Akbar Shah.  
Be this ancient world new through him; may his star shed rays of  
light like the sun. (trans. Wheeler M. Thackston)

Notable here is the idea, shared by the Chinese, that the ruler has in a sense earned divine sanction (or, in the case of Chinese rulers, the Mandate of Heaven) through his moral perfection; he does not enjoy a European-style “divine right” to do as he wishes, but he has the sanction of God because of his special qualities. (The *Akbarnama* is also discussed in chapter 3; Fazl wrote of Akbar’s harem as a symbol of near divine status.)

However positive the public perception of the emperor, ruling the vastly diverse territories of India was never easy and insurrection was a common problem for the Mughals, one of the rare Indian dynasties that aimed to bring the whole of the subcontinent under their sway. From the time of Akbar it became a widespread state policy to incorporate highly ranked Hindu vassals into the Mughal bureaucracy, allowing them to remain *rajas* (local kings) in their own dominions. Many of these Rajput chieftains felt understandably conflicted about their loss of political authority under the Mughal dispensation. Some resisted mightily. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Persian chronicles often present the enforcing of Mughal authority in didactic terms. Thus, a Hindu raja who rebels against imperial authority and then comes back into the fold is said to have “escaped the cesspool of error” or to have reached “the felicity of his majesty’s grace.”

For all of the rhetorical flourishes that characterize both Indic and Persian textual culture, the early modern period (largely coextensive with Mughal rule) saw more historiographical accuracy and a much stronger sense of deliberation about the past than ever before. Historical reflection began to accommodate an increased sense of human (as opposed to divine) agency. The standards by which history was to be written also underwent some updating. In the lead-up to his sponsorship of Abu al-Fazl's *Akbar-nama*, for instance, Akbar issued an imperial edict exhorting people to share their memories of his father, Humayun, and grandfather, Babur, and the recent political events that had culminated in the successful founding of the Mughal Empire. Emperor Humayun's sister Gulbadan Begum, for instance, wrote the *Humayunnama* (*Account of Humayun*) as a direct result of Akbar's command. The politically astute Akbar, who was acutely aware that he ruled over a diverse population, also became deeply interested in the pre-Muslim Indian past. Not unlike the British colonial rulers who would unseat the Mughals two centuries later, Akbar commissioned translations of a host of Sanskrit texts, notably the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*—evidently then seen as histories—into Persian. His court historians presented him as a universal emperor, whose incisive intellect did not allow anything to bypass his critical gaze.

There were naturally tensions between Persian-style historiography and more local visions of the past that had been disseminated through Sanskrit traditions like *itihasa-purana* and the *carita*. Some Mughal-period writers, including Emperor Babur, saw India's Muslim rulers as their only legitimate predecessors, and many Indo-Persian chroniclers rather shortsightedly traced the beginnings of Indian history to the advent of Islam. Others, however, adopted a more wide-ranging perspective, straining to incorporate the events of the *Mahabharata* or the earlier genealogies of Indian kings into their worldview. Occasionally Persian historians, such as Abd al-Qadir Badauni (fl. 1614), appear nonplussed by what they saw as the "preposterous absurdities" of their Hindu sources. Evidently nineteenth-century Europeans were not the only ones to express some degree of exasperation with "Hindu history" or a perceived lack thereof. Badauni was also a severe critic of Akbar. Some of the now much vaunted open-mindedness (in today's India Akbar has become a byword for religious tolerance) of the emperor, including an interest in other religious faiths and his selective adoption of quasi-Hindu practices like vegetarianism and sun worship, could also be perceived as apostasy. Badauni waited until the emperor was

dead before he published his history, an indication that dissent would not be tolerated.

More popular, if less verifiable traditions suggest that imperial authority could be questioned, at least in some circles. An entire subgenre of vernacular poetry, for instance, casts Akbar in a less than regal light. Still a favorite in Indian children's bedtime stories is Birbal, considered one of the nine jewels (i.e., luminaries) of Akbar's court. In tale after tale his legendary wit consigns the emperor to the status of an inveterate bumbler.

The early modern state was a paper bureaucracy in ways that were wholly unprecedented for India—but that had been long established in China, as the earlier discussion of court record keeping reveals. In India, inscriptions were common but writing had never fully supplanted orality (witness the transmission of the sacred Vedas). Palm-leaf manuscripts remained for centuries the preferred medium for textual circulation, but paper became more and more dominant as a medium due to Muslim influence (the Muslims had learned paper making from the Chinese in the mid-eighth century). While Indians of all stripes eschewed print (the technology was available to them, but they never chose to adopt it) until the colonizers and missionaries established their presses, literacy was a prized attainment among several social groups: Muslim elites, Brahmans, Jains, and Persianized scribal communities like the Indian Munshis, who helped to keep the Mughal bureaucracy running.

After the sixteenth century there was a huge proliferation of a wide range of documents, and for the first time it is possible to identify a corpus roughly comparable to the sorts of official records kept in China from an early period. This is probably more than an accident of survival, though old documents did not stand a fighting chance in India's tropical climate. The Mughal state does seem to have gathered information on a much larger scale than was the norm in previous times. A whole class of news writers contributed to a burgeoning information economy. Local languages also became more formalized as written traditions, leading to a proliferation of record keeping and new genres of historical writing at India's regional courts.

### *The Rise of "Unofficial" History in China*

From the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries, then, the Indian subcontinent was undergoing political and cultural changes that introduced new

approaches to history. Formerly poetry had on occasion been a mirror to the ruler and even a moral guide for governance, but with the exception of inscriptions, Sanskrit textual culture had rarely been a documentary exercise. During the Sultanate and later Mughal periods, as had already taken place much earlier in China, the link between history and the state was reinforced: while the classical *carita* tradition continued in Sanskrit and, eventually, in local Indian languages, new genres of Persian history writing and record keeping were developed to support Muslim rule.

In China at roughly the same time, the practice of history had taken new turns as well, albeit in very different directions and due to very different causes. Official history suffered a decline during this period, in part as a result of the Mongol conquest (to the mid-fourteenth century) and the overzealous efforts of the emperors of the restored Chinese dynasty, the Ming (1368–1644), to limit and control the activities of the History Office and official historians. For most of the dynasty, the histories of the different reigns were not kept, and the standard of history writing was low: the *History of the Yuan Dynasty* (*Yuanshi*), hastily completed within two years of the Ming founding, is considered the worst—or one of the worst—standard histories in terms of both accuracy and style. As one distinguished critic complained, “The national historiography never failed in its task to such an extreme degree as under our dynasty” (trans. On-cho Ng and Q. Edward Wang).

But the poverty of official history seems to have spurred the writing of private or “unofficial” histories (*yeshi*, “histories [written] in the wilderness”). Belying the oft-quoted claim that history in China was “written by officials for officials,” literati not employed by the government also contributed significantly to the historical tradition. Although the “unofficial history” genre was certainly not new in the Ming, literati and retired officials of that period produced a striking number, as if to make up for the inadequacies of official history. Tan Qian (1594–1658), author of *Evaluations of the Events of Our Dynasty* (*Guoque*), explicitly stated in his preface that concern about these failures was the motive for his privately compiled annalistic history of the Ming. Criticizing those officials who submitted to the will of the emperor in editing the veritable records, Tan tried to correct the account of the Yongle usurpation by restoring the rightful emperor to the record and praising the actions of officials who had remained loyal to him. But in many ways the flood of unofficial and “miscellaneous histories” written in this period served not just to compensate for the severe limitations of the official



record but also to enrich and expand the historical record. Shen Defu's (1578–1642) *Gathered Outside the Wanli Court* (*Wanli yehuo bian*), for example, is a wide-ranging set of observations about politics and life in the capital; and Ye Mengzhu's (1624–c. 1693) *Experiencing the Times* (*Yueshi bian*) records local economic conditions in the Jiangnan area. These works (and many others too numerous to list) reflect a growing interest both in smaller informal, even personal (“I was there”) histories covering a short time span, and in historical investigations of topics rarely touched upon in official histories: regional economies, popular customs, material culture, etc.

### *Local Histories*

In this context it is perhaps not surprising that other, more localized forms of history writing began to flourish in China. Gazetteers (*difangzhi*), local surveys of counties, prefectures, and provinces, proliferated in the early modern era, although the genre had originated many centuries before. These were topically organized digests of information—including much historical information—about local geography, administration, educational institutions, ritual and cultural practices, economy, and important figures of local society. Of course these works were political products, in that the court often ordered their compilation (and a presentation of the completed gazetteer to the Imperial Library) as a means of identifying a locality as part of the empire. They also served as valuable sources of local information for magistrates and other officials sent from the center to manage local government. But local scholars and gentry of necessity played leading roles in—and sometimes even initiated—the production of gazetteers, and thus were able to shape the narrative of their native place. In so doing, they had opportunities to provide either alternative interpretations of or important details about local events and conditions not found in central state records. Even official editors might use the gazetteer as a means of indirectly criticizing state policies. Feng Kekan (fl. late seventeenth century), for example, in his gazetteer of Tancheng county, Shandong—where he served as magistrate until cashiered for incompetence—makes clear that the unreasonable fiscal demands of the state doomed his efforts to govern a profoundly impoverished area effectively.

Gazetteers are generally shaped by the concerns of government, both central and local. But other forms of local history—we might even say social

history—flourished well outside the purview of the central government. Genealogies (*zongpu*, *zupu*, *jiapu*), a genre that originated most likely in the third century CE, began to be produced in significant numbers only in the late Ming and Qing. This was to some extent a response to large-scale social changes: as corporate lineages developed, particularly in south China, genealogies—accounts of a family’s history, with lists of its members and ancestral halls and often (highly ritualized) biographies of its most distinguished men and women—became important means of registering lineage members (so as to determine who had access to shared property), defining proper behavior within the lineage, and establishing the standing of the lineage in local society. But these works, whatever their social and economic meanings, were self-consciously identified as histories. Their prefaces routinely introduced the notion that the genealogy form, with its hereditary tables and biographies, derived from Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*; the latter treated the *guo* or state/empire, the former the *jia* or family—which in Confucian ideology is the prop of the state and the training ground for the ruler.

Localized history also took on special importance in India during the early modern period. Persian remained the imperial language of the Mughals, and Persian historiographical approaches and historical genres governed the writing of history at court. But Persian histories were also written outside the court, and in the regional Indian kingdoms, local histories in various vernaculars proliferated. Examples are legion in Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, and, in the regions closest to Mughal power centers, in various dialects of Hindi.

Many of the Hindi-using literati were Brahman or Jain rather than from scribal castes associated with the imperial bureaucracy, which means they were more likely to be conversant with Sanskrit than Persian. Hindi historians therefore turned to familiar genres like the *carita*, updating the classical past to meet the needs of the Mughal present. Take the *Man-carita* (1595) of Narottam, a biography of Raja Man Singh Kacchwaha, a leading Rajput general under the Mughal emperor Akbar. One impulse behind this text was to construct Man Singh as an ideal Hindu king and Mughal official (the two roles were not incompatible), and Narottam drew on a stock of motifs from the classical *carita* genre. However, the poet-historian was also clearly grappling with an insistent new Mughal political reality that impinged in various ways on his text. Sanskrit poets were on the whole

more prone to idealizing, their *caritas* more focused on the timeless than the temporal. Often classical writers were concerned not so much with quotidian details as with establishing something more abstract and generalizable about human potential, presenting an exemplary life story from which future generations stood to learn (and suppressing that which detracted from the mission). The early modern historical writings in Hindi were as a rule more realistic and connected to the here and now. The works were often dated (this was almost never the case in Sanskrit). They were filled with proper names, local family genealogies, and details of specific recent events. Hindi writers also attempted “to shape the narrative of their native place” by including descriptions of their cities and matters of local concern. Still, the authors of vernacular *caritas* did not jettison the literary impulse altogether. The descriptions of their cities read more like poetry than gazetteer, and writers would often showcase a raja’s heroic exploits using elaborate poetic techniques. As with Sanskrit, most of the Hindi historical tradition was composed in verse, not prose, so literary demands such as rhyme scheme, alliteration, and genre conventions had a strong claim. Moreover, the western Indian provinces in which many Rajput kingdoms were located boasted a strong bardic tradition; thus, aural-performative flourishes and genealogical concerns—the staple features of bardic tales—also made their way into Hindi historical writing. In performance, bards would have added or subtracted, corroborated or subverted, or in some other manner stamped their own imprint on the narrative.

India’s Rajput kings, like their Mughal overlords, also widely turned to more structured record keeping by the seventeenth century. Scribes kept track of more and more facets of society, from marriage and kinship records to daily proceedings at the court. New genres came into being to document events in more matter-of-fact and less poetically embellished ways than had been the norm before. Local courts now routinely had *daftars* (repositories of records) and libraries.

A dramatic example of this new attention to the archive comes from the Jodhpur court of the 1660s. The Jain intellectual Mumhata Nainsi, a prominent revenue administrator under Maharaja Jaswant Singh (r. 1638–78), began to compile a history of the Rajput polities, including accounts of select Muslim rulers. He naturally had access to the records of his own court but evidently was also able to procure important manuscripts from quite far afield since documentary records were by this period far more

readily available. He sifted through this material and evaluated it, compiling the salient details into a comprehensive account of India's major royal houses.

*History, Conquest, and Counter-History  
in the Early Modern Period*

As a tradition that ran concurrent with Persian historiography throughout the early modern period, Hindi history writing offered up a combination of perspectives. Some accounts of events were quite congruent with Persian versions that emerged from the Mughal imperial domains. But, at times, a raja who was denounced as a worthless renegade in the imperial paradigms in Hindi became a local hero, celebrated for his bravery and martial ethos. There were thus elements of counterhistory. One writer, Keshavdas (fl. 1600), wrote a narrative poem about the Mughal invasion of his own kingdom (Orchha in central India), telling it from the point of view of a local prince whom he depicted as a martyr. Elsewhere, using the *carita* genre, he recounted elements of recent Mughal history that were connected to political intrigues at his court. In the time-honored tradition of the classical *carita*, the work also served as an opportunity to broadcast the kingly authority of his patron, Bir Singh Deo Bundela (r. 1605–27), who was closely allied to Emperor Jahangir. In a political climate that demanded uncompromising allegiance to the Mughal emperor, regional Hindu rajas and their court writers could still project a sense of sovereignty with a lowercase *s*.

Some Hindi writers also expressed their views of the Mughal Empire. Narottam included a brief biography of Akbar within his *Man-carita*. Clearly he thought highly of the emperor, and his perspective was in this sense quite congruent with imperial records like the Persian *Akbarnama*:

Akbar is lord of Delhi, praise be unto him.  
He commands respect in the four directions.  
This is Hindu rule, who says it is Turk?  
The kings sing his praises everywhere.  
He (Akbar) always worships Vishnu and bathes in holy Ganges  
water.  
He doesn't kill living beings. He does not extract rapacious taxes.

Attitudes toward the Mughal authorities varied considerably. Some regional courts chafed against Mughal rule. Bhushan, a Hindi court poet of the Maratha rebel king Shivaji (r. 1674–80), likened serving the empire to chasing a prostitute:

Working under the Delhi government is like chasing a clever,  
desirable prostitute.  
She does not stay faithful to one man.  
But Shivaji is under the sway of a woman called “fame.”  
The woman who traps everybody else can’t touch him.

When vernacular histories served to record dissenting voices, Hindi writers, like their counterparts in China, engaged in praise but also dispensed blame—not, of course, directed at the court that patronized them. In premodern India histories were generally sponsored by courts.

In China, conquest provided a strong impetus for the writing of private histories. These might be acts of dissent or resistance but were just as likely to be serious reflections on the failings of the Chinese state and society. Such was the case after the fall of the Ming dynasty to non-Han conquerors, the Manchus, and the establishment of the Qing dynasty in 1644. The loss of the Mandate of Heaven and its humiliating capture by a “barbarian” people required analysis and explanation: what had gone wrong?

Zhang Dai (1597–1684?) is not the most famous of the historians who struggled with this question, but his example nonetheless nicely demonstrates the almost obsessive interest, as well as the personal passions, it inspired. The pleasure-loving scion of a wealthy and distinguished family of Shaoxing, Zhejiang, in the culturally advanced Jiangnan region, Zhang lived a fairly carefree life until the Manchu invasion. Although impressively well educated, he never succeeded in passing the civil examinations that would have granted him a much coveted official position. In 1628, apparently oblivious to the external threats to Ming rule but keenly aware of the internal weakness of the government of his day, he began writing a history of the Ming from its founding to 1627. This work was interrupted by the conquest, after which Zhang’s life changed dramatically: many of his friends lost to military resistance or loyalist suicide, his family’s property expropriated, he lived a life of poverty and seclusion in the mountains outside of Shaoxing.

He devoted himself there to the completion of two works that grapple with the Ming fall: *Book in a Stone Casket* (*Shigui cangshu*, 1655) and a sequel (1664), both of which analyze what went wrong in the Ming through biographies of the late Ming emperors. The fate of the dynasty was already set by the time of the greedy and indolent Wanli emperor (r. 1573–1620), who employed eunuchs to “ravish the people of the empire’s resources.” But only in the reign of the Tianqi emperor (r. 1621–27), Wanli’s grandson, did the state of the empire become evidently critical: then, “the illness penetrated into the region of the kidneys: since [the patient] was running out of physical strength, malignant lesions developed in the bones. Shortly, those lesions festered and seeped with pus, and the life was gone.” Zhu Yousong, the prince of Fu, who had briefly led resistance to the Manchus as “emperor” of the Ming in 1644 and 1645 (and whom Zhang had briefly followed), was in Zhang’s eyes so contemptible that he did not deserve to be included in the legitimate Ming line: “not only stupid but also recklessly promiscuous,” he employed evil ministers and doomed any chance of a Ming comeback (trans. Jonathan Spence).

*Stone Casket* presents a conventional Confucian analysis of the Ming fall as a failure of moral character on the part of the last rulers of the dynasty. Other historians blamed the Ming educated elite for their absorption in airy philosophizing and consequent neglect of good governance. One of the bolder spirits of the day, Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692), who had fought against the Manchus and refused to serve the new dynasty, identified the vicious factionalism of Ming politics as the problem and then went on to baldly deny the sovereignty of the Manchus; citing many historical precedents, he argued that barbarians could never legitimately rule China.

Had Wang Fuzhi’s views been widely known in his lifetime (his writings were not published until the nineteenth century), there is no question that he would have suffered at the hands of the Manchu rulers. The state’s conviction that control of the historical record was essential to the maintenance of power was nowhere more clearly expressed than in the actions taken in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to stamp out any hint of anti-Manchu sentiment in Chinese histories (and eventually to construct a history for the Manchus). When, for example, it came to the attention of the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1722) that a Chinese scholar had completed a history of the last years of the Ming dynasty that treated the Southern Ming (established to resist Manchu rule after the Manchus had already conquered China in 1644) as a legitimate government and referred to the Manchu

emperors by their personal names (violation of a sacred taboo), he had the text destroyed; its editor's corpse exhumed and burned; the family members of all the scholars who had participated in the work either executed or enslaved; and the printers and purchasers of the work executed, together with any officials who had known of its publication and not reported it to the throne. At total of seventy people were put to death, and many others exiled. It is impossible to find a comparable case in India of such vociferous censorship and retribution. Control over the historical record simply never mattered that much.

The Kangxi, Yongzheng (r. 1723–35), and Qianlong (r. 1736–95) emperors all oversaw campaigns to identify and destroy any historical works (and, indeed, any works at all) that could be construed as anti-Manchu. But, as discussed in chapter 1, the Manchu emperors were also devoted to the construction of a history for the Manchus. Yongzheng and Qianlong took positive steps to manage the historical record by commissioning the compilation of genealogies of the Manchu ruling family and a study of the origins of the Manchu people. The most important of these works, the *Investigation Into Manchu Origins* (*Manzhou yuanliu kao*), completed in 1783, provided the Manchus with a written history that confirmed, through scholarly investigation (or so the title claimed), that the Manchus were descendants of the Jurchens, earlier conquerors of north China—and thus had, by virtue of this precedent, a legitimate claim to the governance of China. This argument required the adjustment of some of the Chinese standard histories; the Qianlong emperor saw to it that the histories of the Jin, Liao, and Yuan dynasties were “corrected” to support the conclusions of the *Investigation Into Manchu Origins*.

At the same time that the Qing emperors were insistently shaping both the Chinese and the Manchu historical narrative, scholars outside the court were developing new critical approaches to the study and writing of history. They were by no means the first to think about historical method and source analysis. In the Tang (618–907), Liu Zhiji (661–721), author of the first Chinese work of historiography, *The Study of History* (*Shitong*, 710), wrote very pointed critiques of Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian* (he found it annoyingly repetitious and wordy) and the work of the Tang History Office, in which he served. Historians adopted a critical attitude toward their sources. Sima Guang and the many editors of his *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance*, for example, drew on a wide array of sources (over three hundred) and included discussions of disputed points (with



textual variants provided) within the *Comprehensive Mirror* (although it is also true that Sima Guang sometimes changed the wording of his primary sources in order to highlight his interpretation of events). And Ming readers were highly critical of the official histories produced at court.

But systematic analysis of errors in the great histories of the past and development of tools for the critical evaluation of sources were phenomena of the high Qing, in particular of the movement of evidential research that called for close philological study of ancient texts, so that their original meanings could be restored. The pioneers in this effort gained practical experience in textual criticism through their work collating texts in the Imperial Printing Office in the mid-eighteenth century; they applied their expertise to the production of several studies of variant readings in the standard histories. By the end of the century, three noted scholars had produced searching philological analyses of inconsistencies in these works; Zhao Yi's (1727–1814) *Notes on the Twenty-Two Histories* (*Nianer shi zhaji*), covering all the standard histories from the Han through the Ming, is the most interesting, as Zhao did not simply point out inconsistencies but also offered more general assessments of each work and, more broadly still, of the nature of historical writing.

The evidential research scholars repudiated the moralizing “praise and blame” historiography promoted by earlier Song and Ming historians; tellingly, they also celebrated Sima Qian for his avoidance of simple moralizing. But the evidential research movement's greatest long-term impact on historical thinking and history writing lay in the methods of critical textual analysis it promoted and the questions it raised about the nature of the Classics. Some of its discoveries called into question long-held assumptions about the sacred nature of these texts; most notable was the conclusive demonstration that the version of *Historical Documents* long believed to be authentic was in fact a forgery of a much later period. By the end of the eighteenth century historian Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801) had famously declared “the Six Classics are all history.”

This view, expressing an eagerness to historicize—and perhaps to desacralize—the Classics, was by no means widely accepted. One of the notable intellectual developments of the nineteenth century was the resurgence of political analysis and policy founded on decoding the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The sweeping reform program that inspired the famous (and failed) Hundred Days of Reform in 1898 grew out of an esoteric reading of this history Classic, based on the faith that Confucius had hidden

his blueprint for political reform in the coded language of the text. The ruler simply had to crack this code, and then he would know how “to overcome the chaos of the age and restore its correctness” by first “governing himself,” then “transforming the barbarians” (that is, the Western and Japanese imperialists), and finally uniting all, Chinese and barbarians alike, in a ritual order of “great peace.”

Historians of the day, whether skeptically critical of the authenticity of the historiographical tradition or certain that it held the key to China’s salvation, were still working very much *within* the tradition and still confident that history—accurately understood—should serve as a guide to present policy. The prominent official Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909), for example, urged careful combing of the dynastic histories for ideas about how to meet contemporary challenges: “Readers of history should focus on exhaustively investigating events and the discussions conducted by the ancients, on searching the causes of rise and decline, the evolution of government, the weight of circumstance, and changes in the mood of the times, in order to benefit the human spirit and intelligence and, when a problem arises, be able to see all possible plans.”

The crises of the day could be understood and resolved only by looking into the “mirror” of the past.

### Modernity and the Critical Practice of History

Although the specific contexts were very different, the development of “modern” history in both India and China was spurred to some extent by the kind of historical force that so challenged Chinese literati of the late seventeenth century: conquest—or, in the case of China, the threat of conquest. In India, British colonizers initiated the move toward historiographical modernity in the nineteenth century both practically, with the reform of Indian education, and conceptually, since the British presence itself and colonial officers’ reconstructions of Indian history spurred Muslims and Hindus alike to reflect upon the putative weakness that had brought them to this impasse of subjection by a foreign power.

The early colonial state drew on many of the resources—record keeping, revenue collection, a Persian-style bureaucracy—that had already been in place since the early days of the Mughal Empire. Like their Mughal predecessors, the British wanted to know their Indian subjects, and turned

their attention to history. They combed Persian, Sanskrit, and vernacular texts; they studied inscriptions and mounted archaeological digs; they wrote learned articles in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Doubtless, scholarly values drove some of this spirit of inquiry, but the enterprise as a whole could hardly be called value neutral. One of the more damaging historiographical paradigms of colonial history, consistent with a belief in the “white man’s burden” and its so-called civilizing mission, was that a great (if history-averse) Classical Hindu society had been weakened and overrun by rapacious Muslims whose supposed tyranny brought India to its present state of decline. By occupying India the British saw themselves as fostering the country’s uplift. This tripartite division of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim, and British periods pitted the two most prominent religious communities against each other. The lead-up to Indian independence was accompanied by massive bloodshed and, eventually, the partition of the country in 1947. Colonial constructions of premodern Indian weakness contributed to a climate where Hindu nationalists felt the need for a militant response to two perceived slights: British occupation and previous centuries of Muslim rule. Here we see some grounds for comparison with China, where a need to understand the Manchu conquest colored Qing-period historiographical inquiry.

Still, there were many different layers to nineteenth-century Indian historiography. Only a few can be signaled here. One towering figure is the Scotsman Colonel James Tod, who served as the British political agent in the Rajput state of Mewar from 1818 to 1822. Tod developed a great affection for Rajput traditions, which culminated in the publication of his influential *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829–32). He is certainly guilty of romanticizing the Rajputs—more than one scholar has suggested that some of his views were conditioned by an appreciation for the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott—but whereas mainstream colonial historiography gave more credence to Muslim historians writing in Persian, Tod was arguably the first to emphasize the importance of the vernacular traditions in Hindi. More problematic, however, was Tod’s tendency to present the Mewar Rajputs’ oppositional stance against the Mughal Empire in starkly religious terms, as a Hindu dynasty warding off a Muslim threat. This notion of a fundamental Hindu-Muslim enmity between Rajputs and Mughals remains dominant in popular history today.

Another noteworthy historian from the nineteenth century is Shyamaldas, whose *Virvinod* (compiled in the 1870s and 1880s) is an interesting

blend of earlier Rajput historiographical thinking with the modern conventions of history writing. Hailing from a family of *carans*, a caste of traditional bardic professionals, Shyamaldas had been educated in the customary Indian subjects (including *itihasa-purana*) but also became familiar with some of the more modern evidentiary methods of British historiography. Shyamaldas compiled various records and sources, both Indian and British, to compose a new history of the Rajput state of Mewar. He was aware of Tod, his seventeenth-century Jain predecessor Nainsi, British findings, and a plethora of more traditional genres, like the *caritas*. As had become customary in his day, he decried the exaggeration that was held to have distorted much of premodern Indic historiography. This was about as close to Rankean history (the nineteenth-century German intellectual Leopold van Ranke is often considered the founder of modern academic history) as it was possible to come, although the institutional context and conceptualization of the project remained more traditional than the product itself: Shyamaldas was still fully reliant on the patronage of a regional Hindu court, and the title of his book, *Virvinod* (“the joyful exuberances of heroes”), reflects a much earlier textual worldview rather than a self-conscious historian’s endeavor.

The academic practice of history—sustained not by courtly patronage but by scholarly institutions—was new to India and a direct product of the colonial education system. History departments began to appear in Indian universities from the 1920s. The Bengali intellectual Jadunath Sarkar (1870–1958) was a pioneering figure in interpreting India’s past through the modern techniques of historiography. Sarkar was especially conversant with the Mughal period and produced several influential works that sifted Persian sources but interpreted them in conformance with European methodologies. From then on it would no longer be said of Indians that they do not have “history,” at least as the West expected history to be written.

In China, “the move toward historiographical modernity” did not require the reorientation in thinking or the institutional transformation that it did in India, largely because history as conceived and practiced in China more closely resembled the methods of historical study developed in the West. And no outside power had the ability—as the British did in India—to impose a new system of education or disciplinary order on China. To be sure, the Qing government, in its desperate efforts to reform, and later the Republican government, in its push for modernization, were heavily influenced by Western models of education (often filtered through the Japanese

experience). But in China history had long been a subject of study, second only to the Classics in importance; it fit very neatly into the curriculum of the modern school system.

But there is no doubt that the dramatic events of the early twentieth century, beginning with the fall of the imperial system in 1911 and the establishment of a republic the following year, encouraged the development of critical historiography. Nationalist students and intellectuals, deeply disturbed by China's weakness, launched a vigorous effort to define a new culture, one strong enough to combat foreign imperialism and grant China a place on the world stage. Most often the leaders of the New Culture Movement argued that the creation of a new culture depended on the repudiation of the old. In historical studies, this trend was expressed as a call to "doubt antiquity" (*yi gu*)—that is, to subject the Chinese histories to rigorous critical investigation, to distinguish myth and propaganda from truth, in order to forge a new, accurate national history.

The "new history" was influenced by trends in Western historiography. Chinese historians who had studied in Germany transmitted the rigorous philological methods of Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886); those who had studied in the United States advocated the principles of the "New American History." Modern archaeological techniques and the comparative method were both Western imports that helped to transform the understanding of early Chinese history and to contextualize it in world history. But there was also another important source for the critical approaches championed by new historians like Gu Jiegang (1893–1980) and Fu Sinian (1896–1950): the Chinese historiographical tradition itself, particularly the work of scholars in the eighteenth-century evidential research movement.

## Conclusion

India and China took their own distinctive paths to the past, but they are not as incommensurable as Hegel once proposed. The differences—in language, conception of time, literary form, and the role of the state—are important. Early Indians wrote their histories in rock inscriptions and epic poetry, the Chinese in chronicles and topical histories. The (relatively) unified Chinese state quite early saw the advantages to governing in both the keeping of bureaucratic historical records and controlling the

“national” historical narrative. India, without the same degree of centralized governance—or a single common written language—came later to this realization.

Yet the similarities are equally striking. Both cultures believed that written records of past events had cosmological and ritual—and moral—meaning. History also functioned as a “mirror” to the ruler, as it reflected either his glory or his failure to live up to the principles of virtuous governance. Not surprisingly, then, biography was a major historical genre in both cultures. Perhaps because of this shared faith that writing history was a moral endeavor, historians in both cultures, when they disagreed with the governing authority, developed strategies—and, in China, new forms of historical writing—that allowed them to challenge or bypass, with varying degrees of subtlety, efforts at centralized historiographical control.

Well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries history maintains its status in both China and India as an important—and contested—arena, as both a narrative subject to official oversight and control and a source of resistance and change. The People’s Republic of China in its early years closely monitored the writing of history, imposing a Marxist-Leninist framework as rigid—albeit in very different ways—as the dynastic cycle framework of the standard histories. Yet in 1961, the historian Wu Han (1909–1969) famously used the history of the virtuous Ming official Hai Rui (1514–1587) to question Chairman Mao Zedong’s policies (although Wu Han suffered the consequences of this challenge with a long prison term that terminated only with his death). The PRC has turned more recently to other ways of shaping history—for example, through the regulation of textbooks and classroom instruction and through the sponsorship of a massive new state-funded “dynastic history” of the Qing. Chinese academic historians routinely produce sophisticated works of “modern” critical history modeled on the evidential research tradition and Western historiography. But the awareness of history as both a mirror for and a political tool of the ruler is still powerful.

History remains too a vital subject in democratic India today, as the country’s postcolonial citizens continue to grapple with the complexities of their past. New voices are being heard, as India’s feminists, Dalits (formerly known as “untouchables”), and social historians generally bring attention to neglected pasts. Engagement with the past, whatever form it takes, remains vital. The capital of one of Emperor Ashoka’s pillars is

enshrined on Indian currency notes, a constant reminder to Indians of a revered Buddhist king from the classical period. The state has rarely exerted the same kind of control over the historical record found in modern China, although there have been contestations over what can and cannot be included in history textbooks as well as academic books, particularly on topics to which today's Hindu majority is sensitive. Some politicians have successfully campaigned on a platform of "Rama-rajya," the ideal rule of Rama—not exactly an inclusive platform for a modern pluralistic state, but certainly one that illustrates the ongoing presence of the past in everyday life.

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