

COMMUNICATIONS

Murder in the Former Han

I have read with interest the review article by Professor Homer Dubs of my book *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China*, which appeared in the February issue of this journal, and would like to comment on one point which he raised. Prof. Dubs states: "Ssu-ma Ch'ien is criticized unjustly for not using correctly the words *sha* (kill) and *shih* (assassinate a superior)." Actually I intended to express not so much criticism—Ssu-ma Ch'ien is presumably free to use any word he chooses—as simple surprise. There is considerable confusion between these two words in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, e.g., Duke Hsi ninth year, where, in referring to the murder of Hsi-ch'i, the *Tso* and *Ku liang* texts of the *Annals* read *sha*, but the *Kung yang* reads *shih*. It is obvious, however, that the writers of the three commentaries were attempting to establish a distinction between the two words. (Cf. *Ku liang*, Chao 13: "It is a case of *sha*, not *shih*.") Since Ssu-ma Ch'ien presumably must have been aware of these efforts, I was, and still am, surprised that in the *Shih chi*, if we can trust the text as we have it today, he apparently did not try to observe the distinction himself.

Prof. Dubs considers my quibbles unjust, however, since "Dr. Watson does not appear to have known that *sha* was anciently read the same as and used with the meaning of *shih*." This is an understatement. I not only did not know it; the thought had never crossed my mind.

Professor Karlgren, in his *Grammata Serica*, reconstructs the archaic and ancient pronunciations of these two words as follows: *sha*—šät/šät (#319d); *shih*—šidg/ši (#918n). This does not seem to suggest any possibility of *sha* being "anciently read the same as *shih*," nor do any of the Han dynasty sound glosses I can find on the two words, e.g., *Shuo-wen chieh-tzu* under *sha* and *shih*; Po-hu-t'ung 2; *Shih ming* 8. It would seem that, as Tuan Yü-ts'ai says in a note on the word *shih* in his commentary on the *Shuo-wen chieh-tzu*, since the two words belong to completely different phonological groups, "they were originally not interchangeable."

What leads Prof. Dubs to assert, then, that *sha* was anciently read the same as *shih*? He does not say, but I would guess that it might be a note by Yen Shih-ku (581–645) to the *Han shu*, a work with which Prof. Dubs is of course thoroughly familiar. In *Han shu* 1A, under the third month, second year of Han Kao-tsu, Pan Ku, in referring to the murder of the nominal sovereign, Emperor I, uses the word *sha*. But Yen Shih-ku appends this note: "*Sha* is read as *shih*. All cases of those who assassinate (*shih*) their sovereigns follow the same rule."

Here Yen Shih-ku is adopting a practice originated, so far as I know, by Lu Te-ming (d. ca. 630), the author of an exhaustive set of glosses on the readings of characters in twelve of the Thirteen Classics. In his glosses on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Ch'un-ch'iu yin-i*), under Duke Yin fourth year, for the entry "Chou-hsü of Wei assassinated (*shih*) his sovereign, Wan." Lu Te-ming notes: "Some texts have *sha*. It is pronounced the same as *shih*. All cases in which sovereigns are assassinated follow the same practice. One can tell from the meaning when this is required and I shall not gloss it each time." Obviously Lu Te-ming is here not describing an actual ancient pronunciation of the word *sha*, but instructing his readers how to emend mentally the text to make it conform to the distinction between *sha* and *shih* laid down by the commentators on the *Annals*. This is clear from the fact that he leaves it up to the reader to decide when this pronunciation is needed. Thus the T'ang scholars, without actually altering the ancient texts, attempted to get around the inconsistencies they found there in the use of these two words. Chinese dictionaries are compiled on the basis of just such glosses, and in time these of Lu Te-ming and Yen Shih-ku found their way into the *Chi yün* and later dictionaries, so that today "shih" is given as a possible reading for the character *sha*. That this reading was in use in Ssu-ma Ch'ien's time, however, it is difficult to believe. Personally I prefer to think that Ssu-ma Ch'ien *did* distinguish carefully in the use of these two words, and that the apparent inconsistencies in the *Shih chi*, and in other early texts, are due, as Chinese scholars have

suggested, to later confusion of the ancient written forms of the two words.

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Dear Sir:

May I take the liberty of correcting an error which appears in Hugo Munsterberg's review of the book by Dietrich Seckel; *JAS* XX, 3 (May 1961), p. 363. It is so persistent in writings about Peking that perhaps a note in this journal will do some good. Professor Munsterberg refers to the *Ch'i nien tien* 新年殿 as the Hall of Annual Prayer of the Temple of Heaven. It should rather be The Hall of Pray-

ers for a Prosperous Harvest. Cf. Mathews' *Dictionary* #540 (2) and *Tz u hai* 午 p. 205.

Sincerely yours,

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CORRECTIONS, VOLUME XX, NUMBER 3

Page 335, paragraph 2, the third and fourth sentences should read: "By 1939, twenty-seven communities were reported with populations of more than ten thousand; in 1948, this number had increased to sixty. No official figures are available for 1960, but indications are that the number is now in excess of one hundred." Page 423, right column, line one: the date 1848 should read 1878.