Reading *Shi ji* without the Biographical Fallacy

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In *Shi ji* studies, scholars from both the East and West have predominantly taken one particular approach: the psychological reading of its author, Sima Qian. Many scholars, modern and pre-modern alike, have inferred the author’s feelings and emotions from his biographical experiences and have interpreted the text accordingly. This narrow interpretation constrains our understanding by exclusively focusing on the author’s personal pains and purposes. Such analysis thus commits the intentional fallacy, which mistakenly equates the author with the text, unjustifiably simplifying the complicated interpretive process.

Indeed, an overlooked but important feature of *Shi ji* is the narrative. Applying theories of narratology from the French Structuralist Gérard Genette to analyze narratives in the *Shi ji* helps to shift the focus of research from the author’s intention to the text. I explore its narrative devices, which have determinative influence over the interpretive process. This new approach enables us to see how *Shi ji* presents a highly complicated past. It pays most attention to how the historical events happened, more than what happened and why, a significant issue has not been discussed in a context of Chinese

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**Seminar Co-Chairs:**  
Jue Guo, Barnard College, Columbia University  
Roderick Campbell, Institute for the Study of Ancient World, New York University

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