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Framing History: Spatial Narrative in the " Li Ssu, Memoir "

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Abstract

Spatial representation in "Li Ssu, Memoir" from Shiji highlights the process of historical construction, ideological reflection, and moral critique. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope and Lefebvre's notion of triad of spaces, the study foregrounds how historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien mobilizes space as a narrative device to shape the portrayal of Li Ssu and Ch'in Empire he served. Central to this research is the analysis of spaces in the text from three aspects: (1) spatial interactions of privy, granary and the Ch'in Empire, revealing personal spatial logic can echo through the fate of an Empire, (2) the fourfold recurrence of Shang-ts'ai, Li Ssu's hometown, which reflects the significant transformation in his lifetime: from obscurity to power, and ultimately to death, and (3) contradictory spaces of Legalism and Confucianism, which show that Li Ssu's straddling between ultimately undermines his historical reputation. By revealing how space in "Li Ssu, Memoir" is not just a passive backdrop but an active narrative force, this paper argues that spatial narrative in early Chinese historiography is a powerful medium to trace origin of historical facts, express internal conflict, shape historical consciousness, and construct the whole image of historical figures. This interdisciplinary approach thus advances the broader conversation on space, history, and narrative in Chinese literary historiography studies.

Keywords

History; Space; Narrative; "Li Ssu, Memoir"; Shiji

1. Introduction

In recent decades, space has emerged as a central concern in Western theoretical discourse, not merely as a physical container of action but as a fundamental dimension through which meaning, identity, and power are constructed. Henri Lefebvre, in his seminal work The Production of Space (1991: 83), argues that space is not merely a container of social relations but is itself a product of those relations. He distinguishes between perceived space (everyday spatial practices), conceived space (space as theorized and planned), and lived space (space as experienced and imagined), thereby foregrounding the role of ideology, power, and human agency in the creation of spatial meanings. (Lefebvre, 1991: 33) In the essay "Of Other Spaces"

(1986), Michel Foucault introduces the concept of heterotopias—real spaces that simultaneously represent, contest, and invert other spaces—to demonstrate how institutions (e.g., prisons, hospitals, schools) organize space to discipline bodies and produce particular forms of subjectivity. In Foucault's view, space is more often political; it is structured by authority and is a means of exerting control. Meanwhile, Yi-Fu Tuan, a pioneering figure in humanistic geography, adds a phenomenological dimension to spatial theory. In Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (1977: 6), Tuan examines how human beings transform undifferentiated space into meaningful place through emotional attachment, memory, and lived experience. He argues that space becomes place when it is endowed with value, narrative, and identity, emphasizing the subjective and affective aspects of spatial understanding. Together, these scholars laid the intellectual groundwork for what has come to be known as the spatial turn in the humanities, shifting attention from temporal linearity to spatial dynamics in understanding culture, identity, politics, and historical narratives. Their insights have empowered scholars to interrogate how space is represented, produced, and politicized in both literary texts and historical accounts, thereby providing a robust theoretical foundation for the study of spatial narrative in such fields.

The conscious development of spatial narrative theory began with the "spatial turn" in 20th-century narratology. Joseph Frank (1945) pioneered the concept of "spatial form" in modern literature, arguing that writers like Marcel Proust and James Joyce disrupted linear narrative to create a simultaneity of meaning, requiring readers to construct narrative coherence spatially rather than temporally. Additionally, Seymour Chatman (1978:19) proposed a dichotomy between "story space" and "discourse space". Within this framework, "story space" refers to the physical and social spaces within the fictional world, essentially, the diegetic space where the characters act and events unfold. "Discourse space," on the other hand, involves the narrative presentation of that space: how it is structured, described, and perceived through the narrative lens, including techniques like zooming, framing, or perspective shifts. This distinction helped lay the groundwork for later developments in narrative theory and narrative spatiality, including work by Gabriel Zoran, Marie-Laure Ryan, etc. Gabriel Zoran, in his essay "Towards a Theory of Narrative Space" (1984), elaborated on three levels of narrative space: "topographical space" as the static, geographical setting, "chronotopic space" that encompasses both synchronic and diachronic relationships, and "textual space" which is shaped by language, chronology, and perspective. Gabriel Zoran's framework elevated space from being a mere backdrop to becoming a driving force in narrative structure. Concept of "spatiality" has evolved significantly in contemporary theory. Mitchell W.J. (1980, 1994), Edward Soja (1996) and Robert T. Tally (2013) are all pivotal figures in its development—but they engage it from different disciplinary angles, like visual studies, geography, philosophy, and literary

theory.

Spatial narrative, a theoretical extension of these spatial philosophies, initially gained traction in the analysis of Western fiction. Scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) and Robert T. Tally (2013) emphasized the role of narrative space in shaping plot development, character construction, and reader immersion. From Victorian novels to postmodern narratives, space is more of an active element in storytelling. In recent years, this narrative approach has been extended to Chinese literary studies, especially in the interpretation of modern novels, films, and television dramas. Some scholars have even applied spatial narrative theory to pre-modern Chinese literature, including monumental works like Dream of the Red Mansions, Journey to the West, and other fictions during Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE) & Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 CE). (Zhan & Sun, 2022; Mei, 2022; Zhang, 1999) These studies demonstrate how spatial elements convey symbolic meaning, articulate cultural values, and structure aesthetic experience.

However, historical writing, particularly classical Chinese historiography, has often been overlooked in spatial narrative research. History, as both a discipline and a narrative form, inherently embodies the dual dimensions of time and space. While temporality has traditionally dominated historiographical studies, space plays an equally vital role in shaping historical perception and constructing historical meaning. This paper explores the spatial dimensions of "Li Ssu, Memoir" in *Shiji* (translated as The Grand Scribe's Records by W. H. Nienhauser Jr.).

Shiji (Shih chi or Records of the Grand Historian) is the foundational text of Chinese historiography compiled by Ssu-ma Ch'ien (Sima Qian, ?145—?86 BCE) during the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE). The classic is a monumental work that blends historical documentation with literary expression, comprising 130 chapters (including 12 Basic Annals, 10 Chronological Tables, 8 Treatises, 30 Hereditary Houses and 70 Ranked Biographies) and covering more than three thousand years of Chinese history till its time. As both a literary and historiographical achievement, *Shiji* is widely recognized for its innovative narrative structure, vivid character portrayal, and moral vision. The text is not only a repository of historical facts but also a complex narrative system in which space operates dynamically: interacting, recurring, and interpreting throughout the structure. Unlike fictional works, where space often serves to build imaginary worlds, the spatial configurations in *Shiji* simultaneously reflect and construct historical reality. Locations are not merely where events occur; they are narrative tools that help to delineate political shifts, personal trajectories and ethical tensions.

Among the biographies in *Shiji*, the historical text on Li Ssu stands out as one of the most compelling and is widely studied. Li Ssu（?284—208 BCE), an influential statesman and the Chancellor during the Ch'in dynasty (230-202 BCE), played a central role in the unification of China. The king of Ch'in State he served was later proclaimed the First Emperor (259-210 BCE), and a new age dawned. "Li Ssu's

Memoir" (*Shiji*, Chapter 87), as presented by Ssu-ma Ch'ien, encompasses themes of ambition, loyalty, betrayal, and downfall. In narrating Li Ssu's rise from backstreet of Shang-ts'ai 上蔡 hometown to the peak of political power and ultimately to his tragic execution in marketplace, Ssu-ma Ch'ien constructs a narrative richly grounded in spatial references. Specific places—such as privy, granary, court, prison, execution site—are not only physical settings but also markers of identity, transformation, and moral judgment.

This study argues that the spatial organization of Li Ssu's biography reveals a distinctive mode of historical storytelling in Chinese historiography. By examining how space is structured, represented, and charged with connotation in this biography, we can better understand how *Shiji* mobilizes spatial narrative to construct history. Such an analysis can also provide insights into the narrative paradigms of classical Chinese historical writing, where the individual's spatial experience is intricately interwoven with the broader spatial landscape of the era. While previous scholarship has paid considerable attention to Li Ssu's political philosophy, rhetorical strategy, and ethical contradictions, few studies have focused on the spatial logic that undergirds his life story. By illuminating the role of space in "Li Ssu, Memoir", this paper contributes to a broader understanding of how classical Chinese historiography deploys spatial narrative to express ideological values, shape historical consciousness, and construct historical characters' images. Ultimately, this study aims to expand the scope of spatial narrative theory by applying it to a genre that is too often excluded from narrative and literary theory: historical biography. In doing so, it not only enriches our interpretation of *Shiji* but also opens new possibilities for comparative studies of space and narrative across literary and historiographical traditions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Perspectives on Spatial Narrative

The concept of spatial narrative, or narrative space, has garnered significant scholarly attention across disciplines, especially in literary studies, cultural geography, and narratology. Early foundational work by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981: 84) introduced the notion of the "chronotope", highlighting how time and space are inseparably intertwined in narrative form. The proposition of this concept laid the groundwork for understanding how spatial dynamics shape narrative trajectories and character development. More recent studies have further developed this idea. Postmodern theorists like Michel de Certeau (1984: 116) argued that spatial practices are constitutive of social and textual meaning, shifting the study of narrative space toward broader cultural and philosophical concerns. In literary geography, scholars such as Franco Moretti (2007: 42, 53-54) and Robert T. Tally (2013: 25) advocate for "spatial thinking" in literary studies, arguing that the mapping of narrative spaces reveals power dynamics, ideological orientations, and

cultural values embedded in texts. Marie-Laure Ryan (2001: 91) further explores narrative space as a multidimensional framework, emphasizing both physical settings and the psychological, symbolic, and ideological constructions of space in narrative. These approaches have enriched the theoretical landscape for interpreting spatial dynamics not merely as backdrop or setting, but as an active, constitutive dimension of narrative structure.

2.2. Space in Literary Historiography

Fernando C. A. (2011) argues that focusing on space changes the understanding of literary history by shifting attention from traditional linear temporality and national frameworks to more complex, spatially oriented approaches. The spatial turn emphasizes that literary historiography is not simply a chronological narrative but involves the production, representation, and experience of literary spaces, which include local, regional, national, interliterary, and transnational dimensions. Similarly, Campbell, C. J. (2018) holds that physical space is not fixed or inherently meaningful but becomes significant through historical and lived experiences, which transform it into meaningful place, essential for understanding history. The role of space in historical writing is thus complex and multifaceted, operating both as a present yet often unstably defined element in historiography, and space is deeply intertwined with time and human experience, influencing how history is arranged, remembered, and contested. (Bank R. K., 2021) All these researchers successfully recognized that space in historical writing is not a passive but an active component that shapes how history is conceptualized and remembered. But very few previous studies were done on exemplary historical works. The classical historical account Shiji, which blends historical facts with literary elegance, is increasingly studied through the lens of narrative theory. (Grant Hardy, 1992; Lei Yang, 2024) This historiographical masterpiece now invites deeper exploration of its spatial narrative configuration. Jian (1992) holds that spatialization profoundly shapes the presentation of history in Shiji by influencing its narrative structure and the reader's perception of events. Shiji as a traditional Chinese narrative tends to organize experience not primarily through linear, temporal sequences but through spatialized patterns of perception. This approach means that events and non-events are interrelated in a dense matrix, emphasizing a network of links between spaces rather than a single, unified plot development. Spatiality in Shiji operates not only on a descriptive level but also as a narrative device that frames the reader's understanding of history and characters.

2.3. Previous Studies in Western and Chinese Scholarship

Among the many biographies in the *Shiji*, "Li Ssu, Memoir" has drawn some attention for its rich portrayal of biographee's political ambition, philosophical conflict, and personal downfall. Still some scholars focus on the ambivalent tension between Li

Ssu's considerable contributions and his fast fall-down during his service to the Ch'in Dynasty, the first unified empire in Chinese history. (Mayhew G. L., 2012; Ouellette P., 2010; Kulmar T., 2014) Particularly, Knoblock and Riegel (2000) examine Li Ssu's alignment with Legalist principles and his departure from Confucian virtues, arguing that his downfall was foreshadowed by underlying ethical contradictions, while Yuri Pines (2012) situates Li Ssu within the broader relations, emphasizing his leading role in laying out plans to establish the first centralized state in China. These foreign studies often underscore Li Ssu's role in historical progress, instead of focusing themselves on the literary narrative construction of the text. But to the contrary, in Chinese scholarship, a majority of scholars probe into the characterization of Li Ssu and analysis of his tragic image. (Ma, 2023; Zeng, 2018, etc)

It thus can be reached that western scholarship has generally examined Li Ssu from the perspective of political science, neglecting the narrative and spatial aesthetics embedded in his portrayal. Even within Chinese research field, few go beyond characterization to explore spatial representations and configurations in this biography. Spatial narrative is still an emerging field, and its application to classical historiography remains underdeveloped. Thus, a systematic spatial narrative analysis of Li Ssu's biography offers fresh interpretive dimensions to a historical figure who has already been extensively examined through political and moral lenses.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Bakhtin's Chronotope

This study is rooted in international space theory, particularly as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin and Henri Lefebvre. Bakhtin proposes the concept of chronotope to express that time and space in narrative are intrinsically connected and mutually constitutive. As Bakhtin (1981: 250) argues, "chronotopes are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel." The chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, serves as the primary point from which "scenes" in a novel unfold, while at the same time the "binding" events, located far from the chronotope, appear as mere information and communicated facts. (ibid.: 250)

Although primarily applied to novels, the chronotope can be a broader analytical tool that transcends fictional genres. And space and time should not be understood solely through the lens of physics or empirical observation; instead, they can also be treated as historically mediated and ideologically charged constructs. This will make it possible to explore how narratives organize historical scenes and "binding" events, while weaving together historical movements, spatial progression, and embedded thoughts. In a broad sense, Li Ssu's lifetime and trajectory—ranging from his

departure from the humble hometown of Shang-ts'ai to his rise in the imperial capital and tragic execution in the marketplace—can be seen as specific chronotopes, based on which representation is concentrated and condensed in a few scenes and these scenes cast a light that makes historical facts seem more concrete. Especially, the recurring mentions of his hometown Shang-ts'ai mark pivotal turning points at various stages of his life. Through this lens, the narrative does more than recount history; it constructs historical meaning by binding physical space and linear time into a coherent, value-laden structure, thus aligning well with Bakhtin's broader vision of chronotope as the gravitating force of narratives' abstract elements.

3.2. Lefebvre's Triad of Spaces

In The Production of Space (1991), Lefebvre proposes that space is not merely a physical backdrop, but a socially produced construct shaped by ideology, power, and practice. He distinguishes among the triad of spaces: perceived space, conceived space and lived space, suggesting that all social relations are spatially embedded. These insights allow this research to treat historical texts not only as chronicles of events but also as spatial artifacts that express ideological and philosophical logic. Building on these spatial theories, scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan (2001: 14-5) thus find space a common ground for writers and readers: for a text to be immersive, it must create a space to which the reader, spectator, or user can relate, and it must construct the setting for a potential narrative action, even though it may lack the temporal extension to develop this action into a plot. And Tally (2013: 19) explores how stories construct and deploy space to produce meaning. This emphasizes how space is used structurally and symbolically to shape narrative form. In this view, space is not static but dynamic—it moves with characters, drives the plot, and participates in meaning-making. This perspective is especially productive for interpreting ancient Chinese historiography, which often encodes Confucian and other values and thoughts. Different values or thoughts can project totally different conceived spaces, where people thus have totally different lived spaces.

Based upon the theoretical foundation of Bakhtin's chronotope, Lefebvre's spatial triad and etc., this research will explore three interwoven spatial dimensions in "Li Ssu, Memoir": (1)the metaphorical relations between the privy, granary, and Ch'in Empire, three places constituting the causal chains of Li Ssu's life-time mobility and political ambition; (2)the fourfold mentions of hometown "Shang-ts'ai" as four chronotopes, which characterize four pivotal moments in Li Ssu's life and together depict the outline of his fate; and (3)the ideological tension between Confucianism and Legalism as shown in the conceived space, Li Ssu, the Chancellor of the Empire, being the chief planner of this conceived space.

4. Spatial Interaction: Privy, Granary, and Ch'in Empire

In the preface to the "Chronological Table of the Ch'in and Ch'u Period" 秦楚之際月

表(Shiji, Chapter 16), the grand historian Ssu-ma sighed at "how difficult it is to achieve unification" (Ssu-ma, 1955, Vol. 16: 2), and in "The Basic Annals of the First Emperor of Ch'in" 秦始皇本紀(Shiji, Chapter 6), words by Chancellor Wan 丞相绾, Censor-in-Chief Jie 御史大夫劫, and Commandant of Justice Li Ssu 廷尉斯 are recorded as follows:

> 昔者五帝地方千里，其外侯服夷服諸侯或朝或否，天子不能制。今陛下興義兵，誅殘賊，平定天下，海內爲郡縣，法令由一統，自上古以來未嘗有，五帝所不及。
> In the past, the territory of the Five Emperors was one thousand *li* [on a side]. Beyond this, were the warning domain and the barbarian domain. The feudal lords sometimes came to court and sometimes did not, and the Son of Heaven was not able to control them. Now Your Majesty has raised a righteous army to punish the savage and the villainous and has pacified the world. The land within the seas has been made into commanderies and counties, the laws and ordinances are ruled by one. Since antiquity it has never been so. This is what [even] the Five Emperors could not reach. (Ssu-ma, 1994: 135-136)

In the "Chronological Table of Nobles Since the Founding of the Han" 建元以来侯者年表(*Shiji*, Chapter 20), it is stated:

> 況乃以中國一統，明天子在上，兼文武，席捲四海，內輯億萬之衆，豈以晏然不爲邊境征伐哉！
> With China unified under one rule, the Son of Heaven presiding above, embodying both civil and military authority, sweeping across the Four Seas and bringing order to the multitudes within—how could such a vast unification be achieved without military campaigns along the borders? (Ssu-ma, 1955, Vol. 20: 2)

These quotes show clearly that Ssu-ma sings highly of the remarkable achievement of unification during Ch'in and Han Dynasty. For officials who played crucial roles in the unification, Li Ssu being an outstanding example, Ssu-ma as the grand historian naturally devoted considerable narrative. Regarding the motivation for composing "Li Ssu, Memoir", he wrote in the synopsis, "He could make clear his plans and when the time was ripe promote Ch' in. Finally, he got his will [in the land] within the seas. [Li] Ssu was the head of all those who laid out the plans." (Ssu-ma, Q. 1994: 664) And in the concluding paragraph of this Memoir, Ssu-ma commented on the protagonist:

> 李斯以閭閻歷諸侯，入事秦，因以瑕釁，以輔始皇，卒成帝業，斯爲三公，可謂尊用矣。
> Li Ssu came from the back alleyways to examine [the strengths and weaknesses of] the feudal lords, then came to serve Ch'in, seized upon flaws and chinks, in order to assist

> the First Emperor, finally bringing the imperial enterprise to success; when Ssu became one of his 'Three Honorables,' he can be said to have indeed been put to an exalted use." (Ssu-ma, 1994: 663)

It can be speculated that Ssu-ma's primary purpose in composing this biography was to highlight Li Ssu's contribution to the unification of China. However, as scholar Mao Kun 茅坤(1512-1601) in Ming Dynasty observed, matters such as his role in his assistance to the First Emperor in unifying the realm make up only one or two tenths of the account, while seven or eight tenths concern how Chao Kao's schemes brought chaos to the Empire and led to Ch'in's downfall. Ssu-ma clearly viewed Chao Kao as the one responsible for the collapse of Ch'in but also regarded Li Ssu as complicit in enabling Kao's treachery. (Yang, Chen, & Lai, 1986: 626–627). Similarly, scholar Fang Bao 方苞 (1668-1749) stated, "Chao Kao's treachery is recorded in the biography of Li Ssu for it was Li Ssu who enabled Kao's evil schemes. The fall of Ch'in—Li Ssu was its principal cause." (Han, 2013: 4695). In other words, while the biography appears to honor Li Ssu's contributions, the deeper narrative focuses on his complicity in Ch'in's demise. As Chen Renxi 陳仁錫(1581-1636) summarized, "This Biography is essentially an unofficial history of the Ch'in; it encompasses both the rise and the fall of the dynasty in full." (Yang, Chen, & Lai, 1986: 627) It thus can be said that this Memoir goes beyond the story of the major character Li Ssu, and probes into a broader account of Ch'in Empire's dramatic historical transformation. Viewed through Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, this biography binds personal (micro) and national (macro) spatial experience with temporal progression, reflecting the rise and fall of the Ch'in Empire as well as Li Ssu's life. In tracing the beginning of Ch'in Empire's spatial transformation, Ssu-ma directs our attention to two humble places: privy and granary.

> 李斯者，楚上蔡人也。年少時，爲郡小吏，見吏舍廁中鼠食不潔，近人犬，數驚恐之。斯入倉，觀倉中鼠，食積粟，居大廡之下，不見人犬之憂。於是李斯乃嘆曰："人之賢不肖譬如鼠矣，在所自處耳！"
>
> Li Ssu was a native of Shang-ts'ai in Ch'u. In his youth, when he served as a minor officer in his commandery, he saw that rats which lived in the privy of the officers' quarters ate the filth and when they grew near to people and dogs, they [people and dogs] often frightened them; when Ssu entered the granary, he observed those rats in the granary eating the stored grain. Living under the great room, they were not worried by the men or dogs. At this, Li Ssu just sighed and said, "A man's worthiness or unworthiness can be compared to these rats, it rests merely with where one situates himself." (Ssu-ma, 1994: 631)

In the privy, food is unclean, and danger is near, whereas in the granary, abundance and security is there. From this significant observation, Li Ssu develops a philosophy

of spatial determinism: one's destiny and social status vary according to the space one dwells in. This philosophy becomes even clearer when Li Ssu bid farewell to His Excellency Hsün 荀:

> " 處卑賤之位而計不爲者，此禽鹿視肉，人面而能閒行者耳。故詬莫大於卑賤，而悲莫甚於窮困。久處卑賤之位，困苦之地，非世而惡利，自託於無爲，此非士之情也。" Those who were situated in a mean position yet plans to do nothing, this is [like] catching a deer just to look at the meat, having a human face, but only being able to walk with difficulty. Thus there is no greater shame than a mean position, nor deeper grief than destitution. To remain for long in a mean position or state of destitution, [yet] criticizing the world and detesting profit, giving oneself over to Non-activity—such are not the sentiments of a gentleman. (Ssu-ma, 1994: 632)

He kept repeating the words "mean position" and explicitly rejects inaction, revealing a life philosophy driven not by the pursuit of virtue but by spatial determinism. Unconcerned with being a sage or a rat, he cares only about escaping the metaphorical privy (his mean position of the time) and securing a place in the "granary". When faced with future dilemmas, he will surely side with the spatial environment offering greater honor, prestige and security, rather than being guided by ethics or ideals. As scholar Takigawa Kametarō 瀧川龜太郎 (1955, Vol. 87: 2) noted, the words he told Excellency Hsün sealed his fate.

This way of thinking drove Li Ssu to defect to Ch'in later. In the State of Ch'in, he promptly aligned himself with Chancellor Lü Pu-wei 呂不韋, Marquis Wen-hsin 文信 and Prime Minister of Ch'in, becoming his retainer and leveraging that position as a steppingstone of promotion. Pu-wei thought him worthy and appointed him a Gentleman 郎. Li Ssu was thus able to present his advice. This official position led him to direct contact with the King of Ch'in. Li Ssu advised the King to seize the moment, destroy the feudal lords and bring unity to the world, saying this is a single opportunity in ten thousand generations! His exceptional political talent soon earned him successively appointments as Chief Clerk 長史, Foreign Excellency 客卿, and ultimately Commandant of Justice 廷尉. His position became increasingly prestigious with each step. After more than twenty years, the King of Ch'in unified the realm and proclaimed himself the First Emperor of China, elevating Li Ssu to the highest position as the Chancellor. Li Ssu finally reached the grand "granary" as expected. With Li Ssu reaching the pinnacle of power, and his son thus holding a high post as Administrator of San-ch'uan Commandery 三川守(note that San-ch'uan was the wealthy Loyang region), he began to fear losing "granary" and returning to the "latrine" place. This fear shaped all his subsequent decisions. The biographer Ssu-ma spared no detail in narrating his decision-making at critical moments, especially "the Coup at Sha-ch'iu 沙丘". In this episode, Li Ssu feared losing his rank and relapsing into disgrace. So, he abandoned his loyalty to the late First Emperor

and helped Chao Kao to enthrone a younger prince Hu-hai, instead of the eldest and rightful heir Fu-su. But his betrayal did not bring him lifetime prosperity, for he was falsely accused by Chao Kao later and even his clan to the third degree of relationship was wiped out.

Yet under the historian's pen, Li Ssu's biography does not conclude with his execution in the marketplace, but with the eventual collapse of the Ch'in Empire. This structure makes it clear that Li Ssu's obsession with the "granary" and his disdain for the "privy" not only shaped his personal destiny but also contributed to the eventual downfall of the Ch'in Empire. The two seemingly trivial spaces, privy and granary, thus become the root-cause of the grand spatial transformations of Ch'in Empire. Li Ssu's spatial philosophy is closely related with the rise and fall of a dynasty. In line with Lefebvre's insight that space is socially produced and ideologically charged, this biography shows how the simple desire for a better place or environment became a historical gravitating force, and finally influenced a broader space. Li Ssu's obsession with dwelling in the "granary" and avoiding the "privy" reflects more than personal ambition: it represents an entire worldview in which space dictates value and destiny. By concluding the biography not with Li Ssu's death but with the fall of the Ch'in Empire, the narrative reveals how personal spatial logic can echo through the fate of a dynasty. Moreover, in light of Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, Li Ssu's life can be understood as a tightly woven chronotopic arc. His journey from the modest rural space of Shang-ts'ai to the imperial center of power, and finally to the site of his execution in the public marketplace, is not merely a sequence of movements in evolving physical settings. Rather, these spatial transitions reflect distinct moral and ideological phases of his life. Shang-ts'ai, as the point of origin, evokes simplicity, humility, and a sense of unfulfilled potential. The imperial capital where Li Ssu reached the post of Chancellor, by contrast, signifies ambition, political ascent, and eventual complicity. In these chronotopes, space and time are inseparably fused to narratives not only of Li Ssu's personal transformation but also of the tension between small space and grand space. Through this spatial-temporal structure, Ssu-ma transforms the biography from a linear political account into a narrative arc of spatial poetics.

5. Recurrent Place: Hometown Shang-ts'ai

What disappears is history, which is transformed from action to memory, from production to contemplation. (Lebvfer, 1991: 21) History is not only lived as active, dynamic events, but is increasingly restored to the realm of remembrance and reflection. It becomes something to be narrated, remembered, and interpreted. "Li Ssu, Memoir" is not merely a record of political acts or state affairs, but a narrative space where memory is constructed. Ssu-ma transforms Li Ssu's historical role from a political actor into a symbolic figure whose characterization is spatially and ethically framed. Space in *Shiji* is not merely geographical; it serves as an integral

site of meaning and memory, functioning as a dynamic force that shapes historical development. In this biography, Shang-ts'ai, the small and humble place of Li Ssu's hometown, repeats itself at four pivotal moments in Li Ssu's life: birth, peak power, betrayal, and death. These fourfold mentions form what we may call the "recurrent place", one that encodes the emotional tensions surrounding the rise and fall of this remarkable yet ultimately tragic statesman.

5.1. Birth: Shang-ts'ai as the Humble Origin

The biography starts with the identification of Li Ssu's native place: "Li Ssu was a native of Shang-ts'ai in Ch'u". (Ssu-ma, 1994: 631) In Chinese historical writing, a figure's geographical origin is not merely background detail; it constitutes a crucial element of personal identity and forms an essential link in the historical chain of causality. Shang-ts'ai was a small part of the State of Ch'u, and Ch'u was just second to the State of Ch'in in multiple aspects. In the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), the State of Ch'u reached considerable prominence in politics, military power and territory. But Li Ssu did not find the ruler there worthy enough. After mastering the arts of emperors and kings from Excellency Hsün, he resolved to head west to State of Ch'in. At this moment, Shang-ts'ai was a place to escape in order to fulfill his potential.

Li Ssu's decision stands in sharp contrast to that of another prominent figure from the State of Ch'u, Ch'ü Yüan (?340—278 BCE), a prominent statesman and poet whose life and work exemplify Confucian ideals of loyalty and moral integrity. Due to court intrigue and the influence of rival factions, Ch'ü Yüan's proposals for reforms and alliances were ultimately rejected. His ultimate act of protest, committing suicide by drowning himself in the Miluo River after learning of Chu's downfall to the Qin, has been interpreted as a symbol of principled defiance in the face of political corruption. Ssu-ma's portrayal of Ch'ü Yüan in his biography is emotionally resonant. The historian mourned the poet's unwavering loyalty, his bitter exile, and his tragic suicide. Unlike Ch'ü Yüan, who remained devoted to his native land of Ch'u despite political persecution, Li Ssu gave up his native State of Ch'u for personal ambition. It is plausible to suggest that Ssu-ma Ch'ien deliberately constructs this chronotope contrast to underscore the moral tension between two eminent statesmen from Ch'u.

5.2. Peak Power: Shang-ts'ai in Retrospect

After decades of political maneuvering, Li Ssu ascended to the peak of imperial power. As Chancellor of the unified Empire, he proposed sweeping reforms. Ch'in thus (1) leveled the city walls of the commanderies and counties and melted their weapons to show that they would not be used again, (2) took back fief, and did not enthrone his sons and younger brothers as kings, nor invest the meritorious vassals as feudal lords, to free posterity from the troubles of warfare, (3) collected and

discarded the Book of Odes, the Book of Documents, and the sayings of the hundred schools, so as to prevent the world from using the past to criticize the present, (4) unified the legal documents, and (5) drove out the barbarians of the four directions. (Ssu-ma, 1994: 639-41) Li Ssu contributed much to all of these reforms and brought extreme honor to his family. His sons married princesses; his family was embedded in the aristocracy. At the height of this glory, Li Ssu sighed:

> 嗟乎！吾聞之荀卿曰'物禁大盛'。夫斯乃上蔡布衣，閭巷之黔首，上不知其駑下，遂擢至此。當今人臣之位無居臣上者，可謂富貴極矣。物極則衰，吾未知所稅駕也！
>
> Alas! I have heard His Excellency Hsün[-tzu] say 'As for material things never let them flourish too grandly!' I was only a commoner in plain cloth from Shang-ts'ai, a black-haired one from the back alleys. The sovereign did not realize my mediocrity and so advanced me to this post. At present, not one of the positions of his vassals is higher than mine; this can be called the acme of wealth and status. But when things reach their acme they decline. I do not know where I shall unhitch my horses [and rest]. (Ssu-ma, 1994: 641)

This moment of reflection reveals Li Ssu's acute awareness of fortune's fickleness. His flashing back to the ancestral place, Shang-ts'ai, is not merely nostalgic; it is foreboding and a warning of crisis. For him, Shang-ts'ai, set in contrast to the imperial capital Xianyang, embodies a humble origin, now suppressed through his relentless pursuit of power. His fear extends beyond political downfall to a deeper anxiety about spatial decline. To rise from Shang-ts'ai was triumph, but to return would be shame. In Bakhtin's terms, this moment represents a "threshold chronotope", a narrative configuration intensely charged with emotion and value: it marks a turning point or crisis, "the chronotope of crisis and break in a life"; such a chronotope signifies the moment of decisive action—or of paralyzing hesitation—when a character stands on the verge of transformation. (Bakhtin, 1981: 248) It is not merely a spatial transition, but a symbolic crossing that reshapes identity and fate. Besides that, here Ssu-ma's narrative joins a broader tradition of historical writing that uses space to chart the mental trajectory of individuals. In this sense, narrative texts just function as implicit maps by enabling readers to visualize and imagine places through description and storytelling. As Ricardo Padrón (2004: 97) argues, "Space becomes inseparable from a rudimentary notion of narrative as a meaningful concatenation of events." Shang-ts'ai is not just a location but a site of emotional weight and social coding. It stands for everything Li Ssu feared: obscurity, poverty, irrelevance.

5.3. Betrayal: Shang-ts'ai as the Underlying Fear

Another "threshold chronotope" in Li Ssu's political career came with the death of the First Emperor of the Ch'in Empire upon his return from the inspection tour in

the east, The sudden death led to an event that was known in history as "Coup at Sha-ch'iu (aka. Sandhill)". With the emperor's death hidden from the public, a power struggle ensued. Chao Kao, a favored court eunuch and the keeper of the Imperial Seal, had tutored Hu-hai, Emperor's younger son, in legal matters for several years. He now made considerable efforts to persuade Li Ssu into supporting Hu-hai's succession to the throne. In this episode, Ssu-ma renders the persuasion process in six dramatized conversational turns. Initially, Li Ssu resisted, but as Chao Kao enticed, memories of his humble origins in Shang-ts'ai surfaced. With Chao Kao's promises of lasting prosperity, honor, and power for generations, Li Ssu ultimately yielded under pressure and temptation. This turning point is profound in its implications. By invoking his Shang-ts'ai origin once again, Li Ssu reveals his deepest fear—not death, but disgrace. It is this fear that shapes his decision-making. In this regard, space is not a passive locus of social relations but is itself an active part of the production of those relations. (Lefebvre, 1991: 90) Li Ssu's decision is not just political but spatially motivated; his fear of losing a socially elevated space is just the "produced relation".

5.4. Death: Shang-ts'ai as the Final Yearning

Ironically, the betrayal that preserved Li Ssu's power for the time being also led to his final downfall. Chao Kao, having used Li Ssu to install Hu-hai, later accused him of rebellion and treason. The newly throned Second Emperor, now fully under Chao Kao's control, ordered the arrest and execution of Li Ssu and his whole family. As he was led through the marketplace toward the execution site, Li Ssu turned to his son and said, "Even if I wished once more to go out the eastern gate of Shang-ts'ai with you, leading our yellow dog to chase a wily rabbit, how could I do it?" (Ssu-ma, 1994: 661; emphasis added)

Under the historian's pen, this final evocation of Shang-ts'ai is deeply poignant. No longer a symbol of shame, it transforms into a lost paradise—a site of innocence, memory, and emotional refuge. Li Ssu, once consumed by ambition, no longer dreamed of power but of simplicity, of home. The place he once belittled as a marker of humble origins becomes, in his face of death, the place he yearned for most. The historian Ssu-ma masterfully uses this repeatedly mentioned place at this critical moment to deliver his historical reckoning: Shang-ts'ai, once associated with lowliness, now mirrors Li Ssu's tragic end. In fleeing from it, he lost himself; in returning—if only in imagination—he briefly recoverd his humanity. As Michel de Certeau (1984: 108) observed, places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve. Shang-ts'ai, once merely Li Ssu's birthplace, now became a repository of private memories, a symbol of a simple and pure past to which he now longed to return. Michel de Certeau (1984: 108) also finds out "the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there." Shang-ts'ai

once denotes what he tried to flee from—poverty, obscurity, and powerlessness, but now designates the lack of life, freedom and carefree days. In his final moments, the recollection became emotionally charged, sharpened by its contrast with the grim reality of his execution site. The public marketplace, where he was now facing a brutal death, stands in stark opposition to the private, tranquil homeland he longs for. But the hometown Shang-ts'ai is no longer available. The spatial juxtaposition underscores a deeper truth: only in the face of irreversible loss does hometown "Shang-ts'ai" emerge as a symbol of dignity, freedom, and emotional refuge.

Whether textual worlds function as imaginary counterparts or as models of the real world, they are mentally constructed by the reader as environments that stretch in space, exist in time, and serve as habitat for a population of animate agents. (M.L. Ryan, 2001: 15) To careful readers, in "Li Ssu, Memoir", the recurrence of Shang-ts'ai at pivotal narrative moments function as a particular narrative device through which Ssu-ma Ch'ien maps the trajectory of Li Ssu's ambition, fear, moral decline, and final yearning for innocence. Shang-ts'ai is not merely Li Ssu's point of origin; it is a space that foreshadows his future. By structuring the biography around this recurrent place, Ssu-ma Ch'ien creates what Gaston Bachelard (1969) calls "poetic space"—a space imbued with emotional resonance and psychological depth. In doing so, Ssu-ma elevates the work beyond political biography, into a spatial poetics of power and selfhood. Image of Li Ssu is shaped not only by political circumstances, but by his spatial imagination—his persistent negotiation of ambition (or vanity) and self. The four-fold mentions of Shang-ts'ai thus do more than chart a life; they narrate a spatialized consciousness. Ssu-ma's narrative insight lies in revealing how memory, morality, and political action integrate through the repeated place.

6. Conceived Space: A Legalist Society

Lefebvre (1991: 38) defines conceived space (representations of space) as the space of planners, scientists, and ideologues—abstract, symbolic, and often imposed from above. This space encompasses mental constructs, ideological frameworks, and systems of thought that shape how space is organized and experienced. As Lefebvre (1991: 49) observed, this abstract space functions 'objectally', as a set of things, signs and relations that are brought together through ideologies and institutions. Likewise, on the representational significance of the chronotope, Bakhtin (1981: 250) claims that all the novel's abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. And histography is no exception, although it does not have that much imaging power. With Li Ssu being the Chancellor, and serving as the chief architect and ideological planner, the unified Ch'in Empire is just the grand conceived space with a certain ideology at the core.

6.1. Li Ssu as a Legalist

On most occasions, Li Ssu embraced Legalist governance and thus conceived a highly centralized and impersonal social space. State of Ch'in he served finally unified the realm, standardized legal code, abolished the feudal system, suppressed intellectual dissent through book bans, and implemented uniform systems of writing, measurement, and transportation. To extricate himself from political troubles and preserve his noble rank, Li Ssu even presented a memorial calling for strengthening accountability to pander to the Second Emperor's whims. The notable quotations are as follows:

> 故《申子》曰"有天下而不恣睢，命之曰以天下爲桎梏"者，無他焉，不能督責，而顧以其身勞於天下之民，若堯、禹然，故謂之"桎梏"也。夫不能修申、韓之明術，行督責之道，專以天下自適也，而徒務苦形勞神，以身徇百姓，則是黔首之役，非畜天下者也，何足貴哉！夫以人徇己，則己貴而人賤；以己徇人，則己賤而人貴。故徇人者賤，而人所徇者貴，自古及今，未有不然者也。凡古之所爲尊賢者，爲其貴也；而所爲惡不肖者，爲其賤也。而堯、禹以身徇天下者也，因隨而尊之，則亦失所爲尊賢之心矣，夫可謂大繆矣。謂之爲"桎梏"，不亦宜乎？不能督責之過也。
>
> Thus as Shen Tzu said, "Possessing the world without indulging desires is termed 'shackling oneself with the world.'" There is only one cause for this: [The ruler] is unable to call men to account, but instead wearies his frame on behalf of the world's people, as did Yao and Yü; thus he is called shackled. If one were unable to cultivate the perspicuous political arts of Shen [Pu-hai] and Han [Fei Tzu], practicing the way of calling men to account, with the sole end of using the world as it strikes his fancy, and instead vainly devoted himself to mortifying his frame and exhausting his spirit in obedience to the populace, this would be a servant of commoners, not one who makes the world his chattel. What is there worth honoring in this? (Ssu-ma, 1994: 652)

Yao and Yü Li Ssu criticized in the memorial were actually highly worshipped by Confucius and thereafter considered as Confucian ideals. But Li Ssu said, "Yao and Yü were ones who obeyed the world. If we respected them, we would thus be false to the motives which inspire men to respect the worthy. This can be called a great falsehood." (Sima, 1994: 653) That means Yao and Yü were shackled and they were shackled because they were unable to call men to account. He urged the ruler to indulge personal desires while consolidating authority through strict legal control. So he said in the petition, if a perspicuous ruler or a sage king wants to remain in an exalted position, wielding great power for a long time and monopolizing the benefits of the world for himself alone, then he needn't listen to subjects when reaching decisions, and he should call men to account, punish severely, thus the world would not dare to trespass against his laws. (Sima, 1994: 653) In this petition, he even suggested that a wise ruler maintain control by distancing himself from moral critics, principled officials, and virtuous exemplars, because, in his words, moral influences are threats to centralized rule and must be kept at bay to preserve imperial dominance:

> 且夫儉節仁義之人立於朝，則荒肆之樂輟矣；諫說論理之臣閒於側，則流漫之志詘矣；

> 烈士死節之行顯於世，則淫康之虞廢矣。故明主能外此三者，而獨操主術以制聽從之臣，而修其明法，故身尊而勢重也。
>
> If there were men of thrift, integrity, virtue and principle standing in court, then wild and unrestrained revels would end. If there were vassals admonishing with arguments and evaluating rationales at one's side, then abandoned and reckless aims would be curbed. If the actions of ardent knights dying for their principles were renowned in the world, then the joys of extravagant pleasure would be abandoned. Thus a perspicuous ruler can keep these three outside at a distance and control his obedient vassals through wielding the ruler's arts, relying solely on himself, and polishing his perspicuous laws; thus his person is exalted, and his power is weighty. (Ssu-ma, 1994: 654).

Driven by fear of losing high position, Li Ssu guided the Second Emperor's wrath away from himself and toward the populace. These actions align with the core Legalist tenets of Shen Pu-hai, Han Fei-tsu and the Lord of Shang, that law must override custom, and that a ruler must concentrate power by calling men to account. By doing so, the sovereign can hold absolute power, enjoying unmatched pleasure. As a result, the Second Emperor welcomed the petition, leading to intensified enforcement: the practices of calling men to account became harsher and harsher, and those who taxed the common people the heaviest became the most enlightened officers. (Ssu-ma, 1994: 655) By confounding right and wrong, Li Ssu destabilized traditional moral boundaries to legitimize absolute state authority. Reflected in social space was that increasingly burdensome taxes became hallmarks of so-called good governance; executions lined the roads, corpses accumulated in the marketplaces, and those who killed the most were hailed as loyal officials. This marked the beginning of the Ch'in Empire's collapse.

6.2. Li Ssu as a Confucian

The conceived Legalist space stands in stark contrast to the ideals prescribed by his Confucian education. By dismantling Confucian frameworks on authority and suppressing civil education, the Ch'in regime became increasingly fragile. Li Ssu's petition sowed the seeds of long-term instability. He left the Empire ideologically hollow—strong in law, weak in cultural value. But contradictions will not exist if Li Ssu were an absolute Legalist, for he knew the fundamentals of the Six Arts very well and his tutor, Excellency Hsün (aka. Xunzi), was actually one of the most important representatives of Confucianism.

Note that Six Arts, including rites, music, archery, chariotry, calligraphy or literatyre and mathematics, originated in Zhou Dynasty and later became a part of Confucian philosophy. According to Vincent Shen (2014:1), Confucianism began with the founder Confucius (551–479BCE), developed through Confucius' disciples and his grandson Zisi (483–402BCE) to Mencius (372–289BCE), and finally Excellency Hsün (325–238BCE). Not long after the death of Excellency Hsün, the warring states were all conquered and unified by the Ch'in Empire; in this process Confucian books were

infamously burned and scholars were buried, most of them Confucian, by the First Emperor of the Ch'in Empire, and so ended this first period of Confucianism. That is to say, Excellency Hsün was the last influential Confucian thinker before the rise of the Ch'in, while ironically, it was his disciple, Li Ssu, who ultimately brought the first phase of Confucianism to an end.

It is recorded in The Analects of Confucius, "A ruler in employing his ministers should be guided solely by the prescriptions of ritual. Ministers in serving their ruler, solely by devotion to his cause" (Waley, 1938: 99). In Confucian understanding, ritual and devotion serve as the moral pillars for sovereign and subject respectively. Despite constructing a Legalist space, Li Ssu is depicted by the historian as at times appealing to Confucian principles. In this biography, Li Ssu, as the Chancellor, explicitly professes his loyalty on four occasions. The first time was in his memorial against the expulsion of guest officers. Li Ssu, in this famous petition, defended foreign scholars and officials serving in Ch'in State, arguing that talent should transcend regional origins. But his deeper motivation was to ensure his own continued influence on a foreign court. He emphasized that these individuals were not only capable but also eager to demonstrate unwavering loyalty to Ch'in. The second instance occurred during the Coup at Sha-ch'iu, when Li Ssu initially resisted Chao Kao's scheme, asserting his loyalty to the rightful succession. Yet he ultimately relented, recalling both his humble origins and the current noble rank. The third time is when in prison and facing execution, Li Ssu compared himself to loyal images of antiquity who were unjustly killed: Prince Pi-kan 比干 and Wu Tzu Hsü 伍子胥. He claimed that, like them, he was a loyalist victimized by a tyrant, hoping to be exempt from the capital sentence. In a last plea to the emperor, Li Ssu listed his achievements and again declared his loyalty.

Li Ssu's loyalty was even highly praised at his time. In the end of this biography, the scribe commented, "Men all thought Ssu the epitome of loyalty. If we search for the fundamental truth, it actually differs from the commonly held opinion. If he had not acted as he did, his merits could almost rank with those of the dukes of Chou 周 and Shao 召." (Sima, 1994: 663; emphasis added) This comment vividly shows the complicated representations in Li Ssu himself. Had he consistently adhered to Confucian principles, Li Ssu might have been enshrined as a canonical figure in history, and he would have thus conceived a Confucian social space. Actually, he did not do so but still claimed his Confucian loyalty. However, as Tiziana Lippiello (2010) explains, Confucian loyalty is not blind obedience, but rather a steadfast commitment to principle, a devotion to moral integrity over political convenience. Confucian loyalty is defined as the courage to voice the different boldly in order to uphold the state and assist the ruler in making morally sound decisions. It emphasizes the civilizing power of ritual and music, prioritizes the well-being of the people, and advocates for their needs and livelihoods. That is quite a different society from a Legalist one.

However, Li Ssu deviated from Confucian loyalty by persuading the emperor to impose harsher punishments. While Excellency Hsün, Li Ssu's tutor, advocates a rational, order-centered model of governance and holds that only through ritual and law could social harmony be attained (Knoblock, 1988), Li Ssu seemingly sought to maximize personal gain by positioning himself between these two ideological poles. Just as historian Yuri Pines (2012: 53) notes, the late Warring States period was marked by the convergence of ideological schools under the pressures of centralizing monarchies. Intellectuals were often forced to negotiate between their ethical ideals and the demands of absolute rulers. Li Ssu's career embodies this negotiation, but ultimately tips toward opportunism rather than principle. Straddling between the ritual and law, he finally conceived a quite controversial social space: a harsh, authoritarian and impersonal one.

7. Conclusion

Space in "Li Ssu, Memoir" by the grand historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien is not passive backdrop but active agent, helping to shape the image of biographee and mirror his lifepath. Each of the three spatial types discussed—spatial interaction, recurrent place, and conceived space—demonstrates a different narrative strategy for mapping the inner world of Li Ssu and the external forces that shape his destiny. By engaging with Western spatial theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel de Certeau, while grounding the discussion in the Ch'in dynasty, this paper underscores the productive dialogue between Western spatial theory and Chinese historical texts.

As Padrón (2004: 97) argues, "In the space of the voyage, places stand in for actions: the route becomes the narrative thread leading from one to the next." From privy and granary, to Shang-ts'ai and Ch'in Empire, this study demonstrates that the target text is not merely a biographical account but a complex spatial narrative that intertwines geography, ideology, and historiographical intention. Still, through the spatial trajectory of Li Ssu, from his humble beginnings and then his rise in the imperial court to the tragic end in the marketplace, Ssu-ma Ch'ien constructs a chronotopic arc that reflects not only personal ambition and political maneuvering but also broader ideological tensions between Confucian ethics and Legalist pragmatism. Space, in this context, serves as more than setting; it becomes a narrative device that encodes historical meaning, moral judgment, and political critique. "Li Ssu, Memoir" thus exemplifies a distinctive mode of historical storytelling in Chinese historiography, one that exposes the subtle but original historical space to trace its beginning and observe its end. In doing so, Ssu-ma Ch'ien offered a full picture of Li Ssu and made space a powerful interpretation tool in the service of historical reflection.

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