

Political Space and Loyalism in Ancient China: A Case Study of Li Si

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Abstract

This study adopts a historical-sociological perspective to examine the interplay between political space and the discourse of loyalty in ancient Chinese historical narratives. Focusing on the biography of Li Si in Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), it analyses the socio-political functions of key spatial settings, such as Shangcai (his hometown), Xianyang (the imperial capital), and the prison, as sites where power relations, institutional control, and moral judgment are enacted. The research argues that spatial arrangements are not merely narrative backdrops but constitute concrete manifestations of political order and mechanisms for shaping individual agency and political identity. Through moral principles, it is socially constructed and dynamically negotiated within shifting political spaces. Li Si's spatial trajectory, from a local scholar to a central power figure and finally to a subject of state punishment, reflects the complex tension between Confucian ethics, Legalist institutions, and imperial authority. By employing spatial narrative strategies, Sima Qian constructs loyalty as a contingent and contested concept, thereby expressing deeper concerns about legitimacy, moral accountability, and historical justice. This research not only enriches the understanding of the Shiji's narrative structure and political logic but also contributes to the sociological interpretation of ancient political culture, particularly the spatial articulation of power and ethical norms.

Keywords: political space, loyalty discourse, power structure, historical sociology, Li Si, Shiji, institutional order, cultural symbolism

1. Introduction

In Chinese historiographical tradition, comprehending political figures requires examining the spatial contexts that shape their lifespans, careers, and legacies. Political space extends beyond physical settings—such as palaces, prisons, or hometowns—to include symbolic and ideological arenas that influence how historical agents are socially perceived and morally evaluated (MJEC Nylan, 1998). Through this spatial lens, historians navigate the interwoven relations between individual agencies, moral discourse, and institutional authority.

Sima Qian's Records of the Grand Historian exemplifies narrative craft that transcends simple chronicle to employ material and symbolic spaces as mechanisms for interrogating virtuous and malicious conduct (Pines, 2014). In this context, "loyalty" is not a fixed moral attribute but rather a socially constructed, ideologically situated narrative shaped by the tension between Confucian morality and Legalist statecraft.

The biography of Li Si, Chancellor of the Qin dynasty, demonstrates how spatial transitions—from his hometown Shangcai to the Qin court's capital Xianyang, and finally to the prison—function as symbolic stages in legitimating or contesting political loyalty and bureaucratic legitimacy. Particularly, the prison scene represents a powerful symbolic site where public duty collides with private fate, and Confucian moral ideals confront the realities of Political Legalism (Pines, 2014). The parallel juxtaposition of Li Si's fate with that of other tragic figures like Prince Fusu and Crown Prince Gao further accentuates the historian's evaluative stance (MJEC Nylan, 1998).

Beyond physical settings, the ideological aspect of space emerges from the conflict between Confucian moral norms and Legalist administrative rationality. Li Si's implementation of harsh legal policies and suppression of intellectual traditions, especially through the burning of classic highlights both his allegiance to Qin's authority and rupture from Confucian ethics (Britannica, 1993).

Previous scholarship on the Shiji has primarily emphasized chronological narration, moral judgment, or political ideology when interpreting Li Si's biography (Loewe, 2024; MJEC Nylan, 1998). While these studies illuminate Sima Qian's ethical positioning and historiographical strategies, they often treat space as a passive background rather than an active analytical category. Similarly, works on Li Si tend to focus on his political thought, administrative reforms, or role in Qin unification, overlooking how his spatial trajectory—from Shangcai to Xianyang to the prison—structures the moral and political significance of his life. Spatial analysis has been applied in broader historical studies, yet it has rarely been explicitly integrated into the interpretation of Li Si's biography. This study therefore addresses this gap by applying spatial hermeneutics to the Shiji, foregrounding the interaction between physical locations, symbolic meanings, and political authority. This approach demonstrates why spatial hermeneutics is particularly relevant: it reveals dimensions of loyalty and legitimacy that chronological sequencing or purely moral readings cannot capture, thereby offering a fresh perspective on Sima Qian's narrative architecture and political critique.

Methodologically, this study employs spatial hermeneutics and contemporary theories of social space production to analyse how material, social, and symbolic spaces intersect in shaping historical subjectivity. Drawing from cultural sociology, historiography, and political memory theory, it positions Shiji within a broader analytical paradigm of narrative architecture and moral reasoning (MJEC Nylan, 1998).

Ultimately, this research argues that political space in ancient historical narratives is not a neutral backdrop but a mechanism through which state power is legitimated, moral identities are constructed, and historical memory is reproduced. Loyalty emerges as a dynamic cultural construct revealed through spatial narrative strategies, reflecting enduring entanglements of power, ethics, and collective identity themes resonant with contemporary concerns about political authority and moral accountability.

2. Theoretical Framework: Spatial Aesthetics and Historical Narrative

The life trajectory of Li Si unfolds across a sequence of symbolic spaces that bear both physical form and deep political-ethical significance. These spatial transitions illuminate not only Li Si's individual fate but also the broader tensions between loyalty and power, and between moral ideals and political pragmatism, in ancient Chinese political culture (Henri et al., 1991). At the same time, a spatial-hermeneutic reading risks over-privileging setting as a master explanation, importing modern spatial theory anachronistically, and smoothing over philological issues such as textual layering, redaction, and genre conventions in the Shiji. To mitigate confirmation bias, spatial claims are treated here as heuristic—not determinative—interpretations that must be cross-checked against rhetoric, chronology, and institutional history.

Shangcai, Li Si's birthplace, is not merely a geographic marker but a symbol of rustic authenticity and moral grounding. Sima Qian repeatedly invokes Shangcai to contrast the simplicity of Li Si's origins with his later ascent to power, framing it as a site of uncorrupted virtue (Kern, 2003). Yet this moralized rural/urban contrast can slide into romantic essentialism; the "virtue of origins" may be a narrative topos rather than a recoverable social fact. Recognizing this risk, the present analysis treats Shangcai's meaning as constructed by the text's evaluative voice rather than as a stable extra-textual property.

In contrast, Xianyang, the imperial capital, represents the center of Qin political authority and simultaneously a locus of ideological conflict. Here, Li Si's promotion of Legalist reforms—most notably the burning of books and suppression of intellectual freedom—highlights ethical contradictions in his loyalty (Hardy, 1999). The juxtaposition of Xianyang's grandeur with Shangcai's simplicity underscores how power can warp moral integrity (Hardy, 1999). However, a purely spatial-moral contrast risks flattening the institutional mechanics of court politics (faction, patronage, legal procedure). A political-anthropological lens on ritual sanction and bureaucratic competition can explain Li Si's choices without presuming spatial determinism, while narratological attention to focalization clarifies how the text assigns ethical blame through scene selection and voice.

The narrative culminates in the claustrophobic space of the prison cell, which signifies failure, repression, and moral reckoning. This setting starkly contrasts with the opulence of Xianyang and foregrounds a reversal in Li Si's political and ethical trajectory. His laments—such as looking toward the sky—and his comparisons of himself to loyal martyrs like Guan Longfeng emphasize the performative crisis of loyalty within authoritarian structures (Eno, 1989). Yet carceral "interiority" is a conventional staging in biographical prose, reading it as immediate psychology risks mistaking literary convention for archival testimony. A memory-studies perspective reframes the prison scene as a site where reputational scripts are negotiated for posterity rather than a transparent record of inner life.

Li Si's final memorial, in which he reframes his "seven crimes" as political merits, exposes a rhetorical inversion: it both self-justifies and critiques the state's betrayal. This narrative device reveals the disjunction between

personal self-perception and historical judgment (Nienhauser Jr, 2011). Because textual transmission may have introduced editorial emphases, the memorial is interpreted here as a crafted argumentative performance whose spatial cues (court vs. cell) structure, but do not determine, its ethical claims. Memory-oriented readings help explain how such performances accrue divergent afterlives in later historiography.

Alternative and complementary frameworks. While spatial hermeneutics foregrounds how setting mediates political subjectivity, three approaches are mobilized as controls and complements: (1) narratology, to analyze emplotment, focalization, and chiasmic arrangement that distribute praise and blame across scenes; (2) political anthropology, to model court ritual, patron-client bonds, and sanctioning practices that shape action independently of locale; and (3) memory studies, to trace how figures like Li Si are posthumously curated, contested, and re-inscribed in moral canons. These were not prioritized as primary lens because the research question concerns how spatial staging organizes moral judgment; nevertheless, they are applied at key junctures to check spatial overreach and to triangulate interpretation.

Debates on “loyalty” in Chinese historiography. Scholarships diverge on whether Shiji advances a coherent Confucian ideal of loyalty or deliberately stages its instability. Supportive readings see Sima Qian critiquing Legalist coercion by contrasting loyal remonstrance with expedient compliance; skeptical views warn against retrojecting later moral orthodoxies onto Warring States/Qin contexts, arguing that “loyalty” in the text is situational, negotiated, and sometimes instrumental (Eno, 1989). A third position treats the Shiji as multivocal: it juxtaposes competing loyalties (to ruler, to office, to moral principle) without final synthesis. This study adopts the third stance methodologically, using spatial staging to map where and how these loyalties collide, while acknowledging that spatial cues alone cannot adjudicate their ultimate moral ranking.

As depicted in Figure 1, the spatial journey from Shangcai to Xianyang to the prison aligns with Li Si’s social identity transformation and evolving moral posture. Each spatial node functions as a narrative space where loyalty is contested, performed, or dismantled—underscoring the interplay between spatiality, political subjectivity, and moral discourse in historiographical writing (Kern, 2003). Analytically, this alignment is treated as a heuristic map rather than a causal pipeline; claims about motive and morality are warranted only when spatial cues converge with rhetorical patterning, institutional context, and the text’s intertextual conventions.

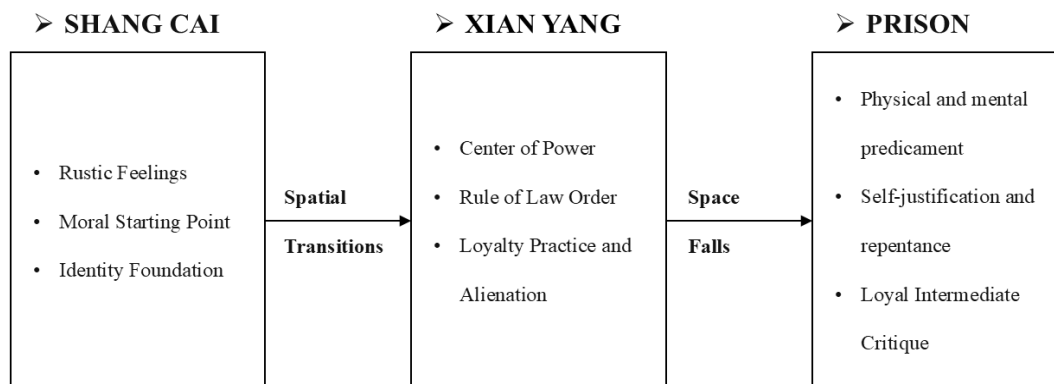


Figure 1. Spatial narrative structure in Li Si’s biography

3. Narrative Strategies and Multidimensional Construction of Li Si’s Character

In *Records of the Grand Historian*, the portrayal of Li Si transcends a simplistic historical figure of either success or failure, instead being constructed as a multilayered, deeply contradictory character. Sima Qian employs diverse narrative strategies to transform Li Si from a mere executor of historical events into a complex intersection of Qin institutional logic, Legalist ideology, and Confucian ethical critique. For instance, Sima Qian records Li Si’s early observation in Shangcai, when he compared the fate of rats in the latrine and in the granary —“廁中之鼠，見人則驚走；倉中之鼠，食粟飲水，不見人憂”—a metaphor that encapsulates Li Si’s lifelong pursuit of power through spatial relocation (Kern, 2003). This direct textual moment, rich in metaphor, foreshadows his trajectory from the margins of Chu to the political center of Qin.

The carefully crafted narrative structure allows Li Si’s image to unfold progressively with the plot. From his humble origins in Shangcai and early service as a minor official, through his rise to power in the Qin court, to his ultimate imprisonment and tragic death, his life trajectory follows a spatial pathway from the periphery to the center of power, and then toward destruction. This pathway, however, should not be taken as a self-evident

symbolic truth. One may question whether the metaphor of “center” and “periphery” reflects Sima Qian’s intention or whether it is an interpretive lens imposed by modern spatial theory (cf. Lefebvre, 1991). Such a critical stance guards against anachronism and acknowledges interpretive subjectivity.

Li Si’s own voice is also a key element of his characterization. In his biography, he not only recounts his role in building Qin institutions but also attempts to reinterpret his “seven crimes” in a memorial written during imprisonment. Beneath these words lies a self-defense mechanism conflating loyalty to power with political pragmatism. By invoking historical loyalists such as Guan Longfeng, Bi Gan, and Wu Zixu, Li Si situates his loyalty within the Confucian moral lineage to seek historical sympathy. Here, however, Sima Qian resists Li Si’s self-justification, subtly contrasting it with the silence of Crown Prince Fusu—who represents a different moral trajectory shaped by remonstrance and distance from the center of power. This juxtaposition suggests that loyalty itself was not a singular value but fractured along spatial and moral lines (Esther S Klein, 2019).

The flow of spatial settings further deepens character development. Each shift—from Shangcai to Xianyang, and finally to the prison dungeon—accompanies a transformation in Li Si’s role and identity. Shangcai symbolizes uncorrupted aspirations; Xianyang epitomizes scheming and institutional ruthlessness; the prison becomes a space of reflection and tragedy. This tripartite spatial arc is comparable to the moral and political trajectories of other figures in world history—Cicero in Rome, whose career moved from the Forum to exile and eventual execution, or Alcibiades in Athens, who oscillated between civic loyalty and betrayal. Such comparisons underline that spatial-symbolic readings are not unique to Chinese historiography but part of a broader cultural phenomenon.

By situating Li Si in varying narrative spaces and moral scenarios, Sima Qian breaks with the traditional unidimensional evaluation of historical figures. He records Li Si’s achievements in unifying Qin while unflinchingly revealing his suppression of intellectual freedom and contribution to autocracy. This dual narrative approach invites readers neither to wholly admire nor simply condemn him, but rather to engage with the higher-order question of whether historical figures can be judged within a single value framework (Esther S Klein, 2019).

More profoundly, Li Si’s story offers a key lens to understand Qin institutions, Legalist politics, and the evolution of loyalty in ancient China. He emerges both as an active agent of systemic power and a victim of its collapse. His life reflects the efficiency and ambition of Qin imperial mechanisms as well as the oppression and fractures wrought by extreme centralization of power. This dual identity and fate give Li Si literary significance as a character and intellectual depth as a historical symbol (Ruziboev, 2025).

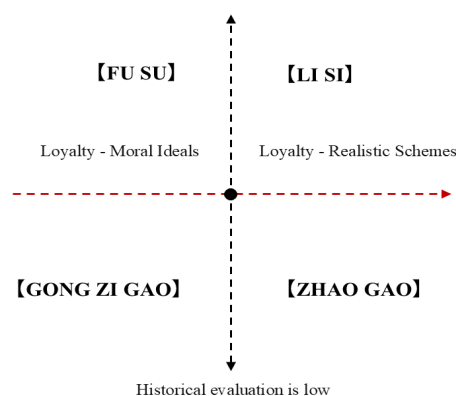


Figure 2. Coordinate diagram of Li Si’s character relationships and loyalty dimensions

Under Sima Qian’s pen, Li Si becomes a figure difficult to categorize. Neither wholly villainous nor truly loyal, he oscillates between ideals and reality, merit and guilt. This complexity deepens the historiographical narrative, exposing broader systemic logics, cultural tensions, and value conflicts behind the individual. Thus, Li Si’s characterization serves not only the textual development of the character but also embodies Sima Qian’s philosophical reflections on human nature, politics, and history. Figure 2 uses a coordinate axis to illustrate the relative positioning of various figures on the dimensions of loyalty and historical evaluation. Li Si occupies a moderately high position characterized by pragmatic loyalty and moral controversy; Fu Su aligns with Confucian ideals and positive appraisal due to his outspoken counsel; Zhao Gao remains at the lowest intersection of loyalty and historical reputation.

4. Confucian Moral Order and Realpolitik

In the context of traditional Chinese political culture, loyalty is far from a mere act of political obedience; it is deeply embedded within a moral order and social responsibility (Esther Sunkyung Klein, 2010). Particularly in Confucian thought, loyalty represents a multifaceted moral value encompassing emotional commitment, righteousness, and social duty. It requires subjects not only to serve the sovereign but also to act courageously during moral decline and political chaos to fulfill responsibilities toward the state and people (Assadullayev, 2018). The concept of “loyalty to assist the ruler” (zhong yi fu jun, 忠以輔君) fundamentally implies support for benevolent governance and moral principles rather than flattery. Historically, exemplary loyalists such as Bi Gan and Wu Zixu are venerated for their willingness to risk or sacrifice their lives to admonish their rulers (Assadullayev, 2018).

However, the figure of Li Si in *Shiji* presents a complex departure from this Confucian ideal of loyalty. As a pivotal political actor of the Qin dynasty, Li Si’s contributions are undeniable. He played a central role in unifying the six states, establishing a centralized Legalist system, and enhancing administrative efficiency through harsh laws and the infamous “burning of books and burying of scholars” campaign (Wang, 1999). From a practical political perspective, these actions strengthened state control and institutional consolidation (Yu, 2003). Yet, from a Confucian lens, they represent a rupture with traditional moral norms and an assault on intellectual freedom (Yu, 2003). Li Si’s loyalty thus manifests primarily as absolute submission to imperial power and meticulous execution of Legalist tactics rather than adherence to the Confucian ethic of “righteous assistance” (yi, 義).

Sima Qian’s text makes this rupture vivid by recording Li Si’s prison memorial, where he reframes his “seven crimes” as “seven great merits.” In his words: 「臣有七事，大於天下，而陛下以為罪。」 Here, Li Si deploys Legalist rhetoric to justify his past service, yet the very spatial setting—the prison cell—undermines his claim, symbolizing the collapse of both personal power and moral legitimacy. This juxtaposition forces readers to reflect on whether “loyalty” defined purely as obedience can ever constitute virtue.

More notably, Li Si lacked intrinsic ethical consciousness. During the reign of the second Qin emperor, rather than remonstrate against the sovereign’s misrule, he accommodated royal will, enabling the ascendancy of the eunuch Zhao Gao and missing critical opportunities to salvage the regime (M Nylan, 2008). His political strategy was characterized by avoidance and compromise, ultimately leading to his downfall as a victim of palace intrigue. This raises the critical question: was Li Si a moral failure, or was he structurally trapped in a Legalist bureaucracy where disobedience meant certain death? Addressing this objection underscores the need to avoid simplistic moralization and to recognize systemic constraints.

From a comparative angle, Li Si’s moral-political trajectory resonates with figures like Cicero, who defended the Roman Republic through eloquence yet compromised with power, or Alcibiades, whose shifting loyalties destabilized Athens. Just as these figures oscillated between service and betrayal, Li Si’s actions highlight that “loyalty” is not an absolute moral category but a contested negotiation between ethics and survival.

Sima Qian’s narrative of Li Si’s prison memorial vividly exposes his self-justification, wherein Li Si reframes his so-called “seven crimes” as “seven great merits,” seeking clemency through a utilitarian discourse of loyalty to state and ruler (SW Durrant, 1995). This ironic self-defense reveals a fundamentally pragmatic, self-serving loyalty. Sima Qian neither outright condemns nor exonerates Li Si but uses narrative tension to highlight the ambiguous boundary between loyalty and betrayal, responsibility and political calculation (Wang, 1999). By doing so, Sima Qian also critiques the dangers of a Legalist system that consumes even its most loyal servants, suggesting that loyalty without righteousness (yi) degenerates into hollow obedience.

Through shifts in spatial and temporal narrative—from the imperial court to prison cells—Li Si emerges as both a symbol of Legalist political excess and the collapse of Confucian ideals. On a structural level, Li Si was not merely following rules—he was helping to construct the very Legalist system that defined Qin politics. It was a system where law trumped morality and obedience mattered more than remonstrance (SW Durrant, 1995). But Sima Qian does not present this uncritically. His narrative strategy itself becomes a moral critique: the very spatial descent from court to prison demonstrates the instability of a political order that equates loyalty with submission.

Li Si’s dual identity as both founder of imperial power and enforcer of ideological despotism epitomizes the tension between Confucian and Legalist doctrines (Ichisada, 2025). Sima Qian’s dual narrative exposes loyalty’s multidimensional nature as a political behavior—sometimes consolidating power, other times diverging from societal welfare. Culturally, Li Si’s story reflects the structural tension in traditional Chinese political thought between absolute monarchy and Confucian moral norms, between pragmatic political means and ethical ideals

(Ichisada, 2025).

Ultimately, Li Si's political acumen earned imperial favor but failed to secure moral or historical vindication. His loyalty, lacking the underpinning of righteousness (yi), appears hollow and disregards the value of the people (min) (Dawson, 1994). For contemporary readers, this duality suggests enduring ethical lessons: loyalty divorced from righteousness risks enabling authoritarianism, while moral resistance—even if politically perilous—secures historical integrity. In this sense, Li Si's biography in the *Shiji* is not only a record of Qin history but also a historiographical reflection on political morality relevant across civilizations.

5. Narrative Space as a Medium of Historical Criticism

The spatial dimension of narrative provides Sima Qian with a vital means to reconstruct the image of Li Si, enabling a departure from the traditional binary framework of historical writing that often reduces figures to simple opposites, either wholly positive or negative. Through this narrative strategy, a complex, layered, and historically charged character emerges. For example, Li Si's prison memorial (獄中上書) records: 「臣聞先王有道，臣職在上書勸進，而今臣七事罪，實為天下所誤。」 This concrete spatial setting—the prison cell—becomes a locus where his moral reasoning, political justification, and existential anxiety converge, demonstrating how space mediates both narrative and ethical evaluation (Tietze et al., 2020).

Narrative space thus functions not only as the backdrop for plot development and character fate but also as a crucial site for eliciting emotional resonance and ethical reflection. By situating Li Si in Shangcai, Xianyang, and the prison, Sima Qian generates a tripartite spatial trajectory: periphery → center → confinement. This spatial movement mirrors the fluctuation of political influence, moral opportunity, and personal peril.

Firstly, at the experiential spatial level, Sima Qian creates an immersive sensory experience by concretely depicting key locations along Li Si's life trajectory. Born in Shangcai, a region in Chu characterized by its humble landscape and simple customs, this birthplace serves not only as the point of Li Si's early intellectual formation but also as a symbol of his cultural identity and ethical roots (Dawson, 1994). Readers encounter the textually rendered fields and local practices, e.g., the anecdote of Li Si studying by the side of rivers and granaries, which conveys the intersection of geographic space and early moral imagination.

As the narrative shifts to the political heart of Qin—Xianyang—the spatial symbolism transforms. The palace space, with its elaborate structures, strict hierarchies, and hidden intrigues, foreshadows both Li Si's political ascent and eventual downfall. Sima Qian notes: 「左右臣子莫不自立其謀，唯李斯盡心」—Li Si's navigation through corridors, courts, and halls underscores how physical space structures opportunity, competition, and ethical compromise (SJCRJ Durrant, 1997). This vivid depiction not only reflects administrative complexity but also signals moral estrangement inherent in centralized Legalist bureaucracy.

The narrative culminates in the prison of the Second Emperor's reign. The dark, claustrophobic confines symbolize not only Li Si's personal demise but also the overwhelming force of institutional power. Through the lens of comparative historiography, this spatial descent resembles Cicero's exile or Alcibiades' forced departures—spaces where ethical reflection, political calculation, and narrative dramatization intersect.

Secondly, in the empathetic spatial dimension, space transcends its physicality to become a symbolic field of emotional and moral expression. The prison cell operates as both literal confinement and a reflective theater where Li Si negotiates self-perception, historical judgment, and loyalty. His memorial attempts to redefine his seven "crimes" as seven "great merits," demonstrating the psychological function of space in constructing narrative voice. Readers are thus invited to experience Li Si's inner conflict through spatial cues, cultivating empathy and moral engagement.

Looking beyond the immediate drama of courts and prisons, Sima Qian juxtaposes Li Si with other figures and locations. For instance, the spatial separation between Li Si in Xianyang and Crown Prince Fusu in a remote frontier post amplifies contrasts in moral orientation and political strategy. Fusu embodies Confucian ideals of remonstrance and humane governance, while Li Si's presence in the palace embodies pragmatic Legalist loyalty. This spatialized contrast encourages reflection on the multifaceted nature of loyalty, akin to the way Roman historians contrasted Cato's moral steadfastness with Caesar's political adaptability (Reilly, 2021).

Moreover, the layering of spatial dimensions enhances textual structure and establishes a unique narrative aesthetic. In *Shiji*, the flow and folding of space, intertwined with temporal cues, form a network that transcends linear chronology, creating a multidimensional and poly-nodal narrative experience. Palace vs. prison, countryside vs. capital, openness vs. secrecy—these spatial contrasts map not only character fates but also reveal systemic tensions and ethical paradoxes, enriching the historiographical and philosophical reading.

From a macro perspective, the sophisticated use of narrative space reflects ancient Chinese historiography's

understanding of the interplay between individual agency, political structure, and ethical order. Li Si's spatial trajectory—from Shangcai to Xianyang to the prison—encodes the tension between idealism and realpolitik, personal loyalty and systemic constraint. Yet, a critical approach also warns against over-reading symbolic meaning: some spatial interpretations may be influenced by modern theoretical frameworks rather than Sima Qian's own worldview. Political, economic, and institutional contexts must be considered alongside spatial symbolism (Reilly, 2021).

Methodologically, this analysis draws upon textual close reading of the original Shiji passages and relies on Watson's annotated translation to cross-check interpretations (Watson, 1993). The spatial framework emerged inductively from narrative observation, though the identification of symbolic patterns inevitably interacts with contemporary literary and historiographical theory. By clarifying this, we acknowledge interpretive subjectivity while demonstrating how spatial analysis enriches historical criticism.

6. Conclusion

The story of Li Si's rise and fall in Shiji offers a powerful example of how space and politics intertwine in ancient Chinese narratives about loyalty. Instead of treating loyalty as a fixed moral principle, Sima Qian uses space—both physical and symbolic—to explore its contradictions and cultural complexity. His writing doesn't just describe Li Si's actions; it weaves together aesthetics and ideology to question straightforward ideas of what loyalty meant at the time. This kind of reading shows how valuable spatial analysis can be when we interpret classical texts. It also opens the door for more conversations that cross the boundaries between historical writing, literary interpretation, and political theory.

First, at the heart of this narrative is the idea that political space isn't just a backdrop—it shapes how loyalty is understood and portrayed. In Shiji, Li Si isn't simply a historical figure moving through events; he becomes a marker of shifting positions—social, ideological, and physical. Each place he inhabits carries meaning. His hometown Shangcai evokes his scholarly roots and modest background. Xianyang, the Qin capital, signifies the concentration of imperial power and the harsh reality of governance. And the prison cell, in the end, becomes a space of erasure—a symbol of punishment and of loyalty betrayed. These shifts from one place to another aren't just changes of location; they reflect the unstable nature of loyalty itself, especially when caught up in the machinery of imperial rule.

Second, Sima Qian's aesthetic treatment of space reveals his unique narrative strategy. Space serves not merely as setting, but as a carrier of emotion and ideology. The warmth of Shangcai contrasts sharply with the solemnity of Xianyang, marking Li Si's transformation from rural intellectual to imperial minister, while implicitly critiquing the corruption of power and the alienation of self. The darkness and enclosure of the prison evoke despair, inviting readers to sense the protagonist's emotional collapse. Through detailed spatial depictions, Sima Qian elicits sensory and emotional engagement, merging historical narration with literary expression. This spatial aesthetic not only enhances artistic impact but deepens the psychological and ethical dimensions of the character.

Third, spatial narration allows a more nuanced and multidimensional critique of loyalty. While Confucian ideals emphasize moral uprightness and fidelity to the ruler, Li Si, a Legalist strategist, embodies a pragmatism that often conflicts with these ideals. The political court reveals his cunning loyalty to Qin Shi Huang, whereas the prison becomes a space of moral ambiguity, where his self-defense and invocation of merit ("seven merits, seven crimes") reveal internal conflicts between loyalty and self-interest. Through the symbolic layering of space, Shiji demonstrates that loyalty is not a fixed moral absolute, but a contingent construct shaped by institutions, historical conditions, and shifting values.

Moreover, the introduction of spatial analysis enriches historical methodology. Traditional historiography tends to prioritize chronology and causality; spatial reading, by contrast, uncovers new interpretive dimensions. It enables the reconfiguration of historical texts as multi-layered spatial systems rather than linear narratives. By examining the symbolic function of space and its emotional and structural connections to character and plot, scholars gain a more comprehensive understanding of historical narratives and their ideological underpinnings. Particularly in classical Chinese historiography where literature and history often intertwine, spatial analysis fosters interdisciplinary innovation.

In political philosophy, spatial narration uncovers the material and symbolic mechanics of power. Li Si's story, framed by spatial transitions, reveals how political loyalty is not merely an ethical stance but a mode of navigating power-laden environments. The prison, as an extreme spatial form, exposes the punitive limits of authority and the volatility of institutional trust. Space, as a conduit of political influence, reminds us that loyalty must be examined in the context of legal structures, coercive systems, and moral negotiations. Sima Qian's

spatial practice thus offers historical insight into the relational dynamics of loyalty, power, and subjectivity.

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