

# An Examination of the Factors Contributing to Li Guang's Challenges in Securing a Marquisate as Depicted in the 'Biography of General Li' from the Records of the Grand Historian

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## Abstract:

At the conclusion of the Biography of General Li, Li Guang expressed self-pity: 'Ultimately, I could not stand before the clerks and scribes.' This seasoned general, who devoted his life to the conflict against the Xiongnu from his youth, never achieved his lifelong aspiration of being granted the title of marquis. It is very regrettable. The academic community has extensively debated the issue of 'Li Guang's challenges in obtaining a title', resulting in several viewpoints, including the 'theory of fate', 'theory of character determinism', and 'theory of institutional environment'. These studies have enhanced our comprehension of this subject from multiple viewpoints. Nonetheless, the majority of studies see the biographies of General Li only as historical evidence to support their claims, rather than as fundamental analytical texts. As a result, they have not thoroughly analysed how Sima Qian utilised literary characterisation to express his deep understanding of this tragedy. This study utilises close reading and character analysis as primary research methods, complemented by descriptive statistical analysis, to examine the core text of General Li's biography. This analysis commences with the authentic historical biography, examining Sima Qian's multifaceted depiction and development of Li Guang's character. It analyses the systemic relationship between Li Guang's complex character and his continual inability to achieve a high military rank, uncovering the many conflicts between his personal attributes and the political-military framework of the Han dynasty. Ultimately, these circumstances ultimately led to his failure to obtain a prominent position.

**Keywords:** Li Guang; the biography of General Li; Li Guang's challenges in obtaining a title; Sima Qian.

## 1. Introduction

The lament ‘Li Guang’s failure to obtain a title’ has transcended its historical context, becoming a cultural emblem of misfortune and unmerited acknowledgement for exceptional accomplishments. Li Guang and his destiny constitute a crucial narrative in Sima Qian’s records and continue to be a topic of persistent examination and discourse in later literature, historiography, and sociology. This historical phenomena persists because it addresses the enduring question of the complex interplay between individual brilliance, institutional limitations, and the prevailing possibilities of the era.

Reasons for Li Guang’s inability to achieve a marquise, resulting in numerous scholarly conclusions. Multiple representative viewpoints have arisen: Primarily, the ‘fatalism theory’, Kang Z. L. and Liang D. M. examines the influence of Chinese metaphysical theories on Li Guang’s fate from both subjective and objective dimensions, arguing that the reason behind “Li Guang’s inability to be enfeoffed” was his “ill-fated destiny”[1]. Secondly, the ‘Determinism of Character’ posits that despite Li Guang’s valour as a warrior and his paternal regard for his soldiers, his deficiencies in strategic foresight, inadequate political insight, and propensity for indiscriminately executing surrendered soldiers were character flaws that ultimately hindered his advancement[2]. Thirdly, the “Institutional Environment Theory” investigates the disparity between Li Guang’s individual military approach and the exigencies of his time, analysing this within the broader context of the Han dynasty’s military meritocratic system, which necessitated tangible accomplishments such as decapitations and territorial expansion, in conjunction with the strategic evolution of warfare[3]. These studies have enhanced our comprehension from multiple viewpoints; yet, the majority regard General Li’s biographies as a basis for discussion rather than as primary texts study. result, they neglect to thoroughly analyse how Sima Qian utilised literary characterisation to quietly express his deep perspective of this tragedy.

paper seeks to revisit the primary text of the ‘Biography of General Li’ in the Records the Grand Historian. This study utilises close reading and character analysis as its main research methods to investigate the underlying reasons for Li’s ‘difficulty in being enfeoffed’ through a comprehensive deconstruction of General Li’s character as depicted by Sima Qian. This dissertation methodically analyses the portrayal of Li Guang in biographical narratives, scrutinising his complex and conflicting characteristics: “valiant and adept in archery,” “compassionate towards his soldiers,” and “susceptible to impulsive actions.” This study contextualises these character traits within the mil-

itary merit assessment system and political framework of the Han dynasty, illustrating how his image resulted in a deficiency of military accomplishments, a lack of political resources, and a deviation from the supreme ruler’s expectations. This research aims to move beyond basic explanations of character or fate, instead uncovering the tragic destiny shaped by interaction of individual identity, personal characteristics, and institutional evaluation criteria within the context of history.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the historical dilemma of “Li Guang’s Difficulty in Securing a Title” through primary texts, while also illustrating the significant influence of the Shiji’s literary style—characterized as “the unrhymed Liao Sao”—in shaping historical comprehension and conveying history. This, thus, enhances our understanding of Sima Qian’s craftsmanship in historical narration.

## 2. The Varied Representation of General Li Guang in The Biographies of General Li

Sima Qian commences his ‘Biography of General Li’ by depicting the character of Li Guang, establishing a foundation through the family tradition of ‘generations of Li having practiced archery,’ thereby demonstrating the Li clan’s enduring commitment to martial arts and exemplary cultivation. Subsequently, through early exploits like as storming castles and vanquishing formidable creatures, he initially delineates Li Guang’s attributes of courage and archery proficiency[4]. During the sixth year of the Yuanguang era, Li Guang was apprehended in the Battle of Yanmen. he deceased. youth’s steed and subsequently dislodged him. youth’s bow, he urged his horse southward for several dozen kilometres, ultimately reuniting with his remaining forces[4]. dangerous situation of his capture, Li Guang shown remarkable bravery and determination. opportunity, he sprang from the adversary’s grasp, commandeered a horse, and evaded capture to reunite with his own troops. Qian shown remarkable acumen on the perilous life-and-death scenarios faced in warfare. Such conditions frequently challenge one’s courage, knowledge, and moral integrity, perhaps generating heroic acts that resonate profoundly and evoke the spirits—achievements rarely observed in times of peace[5]. The text meticulously describes the legendary episode in which ‘Li Guang went hunting, perceived a stone in the grass as a tiger, and shot at it, the arrowhead embedding itself in the stone.’ This effectively demonstrates Li Guang’s formidable strength; however, the subsequent remark that ‘he shot at it again, but the arrow could not penetrate the stone a second time’

subtly implies that such exceptional ability was often contingent upon particular circumstances and was not perpetually sustained[4]. This foreshadows the unpredictability in Li Guang's later military career, where his battlefield performance was inconsistent, sometimes placing him in dangerous situations[4]. Li Guang's portrayal as a courageous warrior was persistently upheld against the historical context of ongoing conflict with the Xiongnu. After dedicating the initial half of his life to combat under the reigns of Emperor Wen and Emperor Jing, he attained elevated governmental positions. He consecutively held the governorship of significant frontier territories, including Longxi, Beidi, Yanmen, Dai Commandery, Yunzhong, and other vital border regions. These achievements finally established his distinctive reputation: 'The Xiongnu dreaded Li Guang's military tactics, while his soldiers favoured serving under him rather than facing the adversities imposed by Cheng Buxi.' [4].

In the biography of General Li, Li Guang is shown as a commander of remarkable endurance and generosity. "When Li Guang commanded his forces in areas of severe deprivation, if they found water, his soldiers would refrain from drinking until all had satisfied their thirst, and Li Guang would abstain from the water himself; if they had not eaten until all were satiated, Li Guang would not partake of food." [4]. The soldiers had not yet consumed water, nor would he partake; the men had not yet satisfied their hunger, nor would he take a morsel. This approach of sharing adversities with his comrades, demonstrating empathy towards his subordinates, and practicing 'leniency rather than severity' compelled 'the soldiers to readily follow Li Guang.' [4]. Sima Qian documented the deep bond between Li Guang and his soldiers: 'His troops were equally satisfied and elated, all prepared to sacrifice their lives for him.' [4]. The unwavering loyalty of his troops was evident as they were willing to sacrifice their lives for him, indicating a profound connection between the commander and his men. One may enquire: if Li Guang had not truly valued even his most subordinate soldiers, how could he have garnered such genuine loyalty? 'The biography of General Li Guang' explicitly states: 'Li Guang was incorruptible; upon receiving prizes, he would allocate them to his subordinates, sharing his provisions with his soldiers.' [4]. Throughout his life, despite maintaining the rank of 2,000 stone for almost forty years, his household lacked any spare wealth. The author asserts that Sima Qian's depiction of Li Guang as a virtuous commander with personal integrity granted him significant moral charisma. Such incorruptible and sharing behaviors made the soldiers feel valued, greatly boosting their morale and making them more willing to fight bravely for Li Guang. These virtuous attributes, together Li Guang's courage,

marksmanship, and commitment to national defence, collectively established an excellent moral character. Consequently, the portrayal of Li Guang—a valiant and martial general—remains prominent in the chronicles of civilisation. Sima Qian contrasts an excellent figure with Li Guang's perpetual failure to achieve the esteemed title of marquis, so enhancing his historical character's moral significance and tragic complexity. This difference has motivated numerous poets and thinkers over time to articulate their deep remorse and sorrow.

Sima Qian's biography of General Li candidly portrays Li Guang's character deficiencies. Preeminent among these was his slack military discipline: 'Li Guang advanced without structured formations or battle lines, encamping wherever water and pasture were advantageous.' [4]. His troops rested freely, without the sounding of sentry drums for protection. Li Guang's military operations were characterised by a lack of rigorous formations and strategic deployments; encampment locations were selected arbitrarily, and no night sentinels were assigned for self-protection. The laxity in military discipline rendered his men incapable of resisting ambushes. Li Guang's lax military discipline was a double-edged sword: while it won him the allegiance of his troops, it proved to be a fatal flaw in sudden engagements, leading to delayed responses, breakdowns in coordination, and ultimately, inevitable defeat. This sharply contrasted with the stringent military discipline of Cheng Bushi's 'fully structured regimental troops, marching formations, and encampments' at that period [4]. Furthermore, Sima Qian illustrated Li Guang's unfavourable characteristic of being unyielding. The narrative describes how Li Guang once ventured out alone at night, pausing to drink with his soldiers in the fields. Upon his return to Balin Pavilion, the intoxicated constable of Balin reprimanded and obstructed Li Guang [4]. The inebriated magistrate of Balin disregarded Li Guang, who was experiencing the vulnerable phase of his demotion to commoner status. Having having been accustomed to wielding authority as a general, how could he endure the contempt exhibited by an insignificant magistrate? Remarkably, this insignificant conflict resulted in a significant revelation: although Li Guang initially tolerated the affront, upon regaining authority, he swiftly 'summoned the magistrate to his camp and had him executed.' This event exposed Li Guang's vindictive disposition and his tendency to harbour resentments over trivial issues [4]. Sima Qian noted that Li Guang was 'a taciturn individual who would sketch military formations in the earth while in the company of others and engage in drinking while aiming at targets of differing widths.' leisure activity and ultimately perished as a result. [4]. This characteristic of taciturnity, along with an obsession for military games,

may have rendered him deficient in the verbal eloquence and strategic foresight anticipated of a statesman. These activities expose Li Guang's character deficiencies: a talented individual who is impulsive, without of political insight, and lacking in generosity. For a man of few words, ill-equipped for self-justification and more likely to demonstrate his worth via actions, the grief and inner turmoil he experienced in the face of hardship and injustice may have been particularly arduous and challenging for others to understand. Regarding his deepest goals, the resentment stemming from his inability to achieve a marquisate, and the perplexing ascendance of his successors, he could only internally process these issues in silence. These elements unequivocally intensified the tragic essence of his existence.

Sima Qian employs literary and multi-dimensional characterisation to depict a complex figure who combines martial prowess with benevolence, while concealing inherent character flaws, thus laying the groundwork for understanding the tragedy of Li Guang's failure to achieve the title of marquis.

### **3. Examining the Factors Contributing to Li Guang's Challenges in Securing a Marquisate: From Character Depiction to Contextual Influences**

Li Guang's martial approach directly impacted his attainment of military accolades. Despite his personal valour and fighting proficiency, he often recklessly engaged opposing forces single-handedly, becoming ensnared in conflict and endangering himself. As a result, his losses surpassed his successes, complicating his ability to fulfil the rigorous criterion of 'counting captive heads' inside the Han dynasty's military meritocratic ranking system. The Han dynasty adopted the Qin system, and by this age, the military merit reward system had become more elaborate. Quantitative metrics and explicit procedures were instituted regarding the tally of enemy heads collected, the count of prisoners apprehended, and the associated awards or honours conferred. The granting of marquis titles and advancements for military officers was mostly dependent on military accomplishments. During the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, the criterion for a soldier to be granted the title of marquis necessitated the capture of more than a thousand enemy heads and prisoners[6]. Based on the content of the Han Dynasty bamboo slips titled "Regulations on Rewards for Those Who Attack and Capture Surrendered Xiongnu" unearthed in Dunhuang, which pertain to the system of military merit and ranks during the Han Dynasty, we can ascertain that: those (here

referring to military officers) capable of defeating and compelling the surrender of over 8,000 Xiongnu soldiers were eligible to be enfeoffed as a ranked marquis or granted a town fief, while officials of the two-thousand-bushel rank were bestowed five hundred catties of gold.[7] 'The biography of General Li' does not disclose the amount of enemy casualties in any recorded conflicts. Concerning the recorded enemy casualties in the biographies, as illustrated in Table 1, the initial occurrence transpired in the fourteenth year of Emperor Wen's reign (166 BCE), with the battle's outcome described as: 'Numerous heads were severed and captives taken'; the subsequent instance arose in the third year of Emperor Jing's reign (154 BCE), when Li Guang, alongside Zhou Yafu, countered the insurrectionary forces of Wu and Chu, resulting in: 'Banners were seized, and distinguished accomplishments were achieved beneath Changyi'; the third instance took place in the second year of the Yuanguang era (133 BCE), during which Li Guang held the position of General of the Flying Cavalry. The Han court enticed the Xiongnu to assault Ma Yi, but the scheme was uncovered en route, leading to 'no accomplishments for the Han forces.' The fourth occurrence transpired in the sixth year of the Yuanguang era (129 BCE), when Li Guang, having been appointed general from his position as palace guard commander, spearheaded an expedition against the Xiongnu from Yanmen Pass. The result was: 'Guang's forces were defeated, and he was taken prisoner.' Following his escape, Li Guang was deprived of his military position and reduced to the status of a commoner. The fifth occurrence transpired in the sixth year of the Yuanshuo era (123 BCE), during which Guang held the position of Rear General under Wei Qing in an expedition beyond the frontier. The result was: 'Guang's forces attained no success.' The sixth occurrence was in the second year of the Yuanshou dynasty (121 BCE), when Guang, acting as Lord Chamberlain, commanded troops from Youbeiping over the frontier. The advantages and disadvantages were balanced: 'Guang's military accomplishments persisted unaltered, with no accolades bestowed.' The seventh occurrence, in the fourth year of Yuanshou (119 BCE), which was also the concluding one, involved Li Guang joining Wei Qing in an assault on the Xiongnu. The result was: 'The army lost its guides; some deviated from the route and lagged behind the General-in-Chief.' [4]. The aforementioned records are presented in Table 1 below. Biographical records indicate that Sima Qian did not explicitly document the number of adversaries Li Guang defeated in each engagement. This prompts the author to conjecture that Li Guang's count of enemy kills may have been insufficient for the attainment of a marquis title. multiple campaigns, he constantly received 'no merit' — a substantial factor preventing him



from attaining the position of marquis. tactics instilled fear in the Xiongnu, yet often led to the near destruction of his troops, necessitating their withdrawal. military merit system of the Han dynasty, frequently counterbalanced by his failures[4]. Qian objectively notes that ‘officers and soldiers under Li Guang were occasionally granted marquises’, while Li Guang himself ‘received neither

fief nor title, his rank never surpassing that of a minister of the Nine Departments’. text’s repeated allegation that ‘Li Guang’s military virtues remained unrecognised, yet he earned no prize’ plainly illustrates the contradiction between Li Guang’s individual capabilities and the quantitative framework for assessing military worth [4].

**Table 1. Military engagements led by general Li Guang and their results as documented in The Biography of General Li**

Duration	Outcome
The fourteenth year of Emperor Wen’s reign (166 BC)	‘Slaying many enemy heads’
The third year of Emperor Jing’s reign (154 BC)	‘Seize the banner, and let your fame be known throughout Changyi.’
The second year of the Yuanguang era (133 BC)	‘None of the Han forces achieved any success.’
The sixth year of the Yuanguang era (129 BC)	‘The Guang Army lies in ruins, yet Guang survives.’
The sixth year of the Yuanshuo era (123 BC)	‘The Guangjun Army achieved no success.’
The second year of the Yuanshou era (121 BC)	‘His military exploits were as natural as breathing, yet he received no reward.’
The fourth year of the Yuanshou era (119 BC)	‘When an army loses its commander, or strays from the path, the general will be defeated.’

Li Guang’s reticent disposition, deficiency in eloquence, and limited political acumen significantly obstructed his progress in the political arena. His biography states: ‘Guang proclaimed to his commanders, “Since the Han initiated campaigns against the Xiongnu, I have consistently participated in the conflict.”[4]. However, among the numerous commanders and officers subordinate to me, several whose competencies are below the average individual have been granted the title of marquises for their military achievements against the Hu. Li Guang’s complaint to Wang Shuo on his inability to achieve marquis rank resembled a desperate cry from one pushed to the edge of despair. Li Guang asserted that he had engaged in every campaign, both significant and minor, yet individuals who were formerly his subordinates were awarded marquises while he remained unrecognised. Regrettably, he made yet another political error. During a lavish supper hosted by the court, he candidly asserted that despite numerous years of warfare, he had yet to be granted the title of marquis. This explicit manifestation of unhappiness revealed his disgust with the system to the public. It was equivalent to criticising the monarch of failing to acknowledge an imposing mountain, tacitly reproaching Emperor Wu for his neglect. Which emperor could hear such things and remain unaffected? Such statements inevitably incited animosity among the elite. In his introspection, he stated, “During my tenure as governor of Longxi, the Qiang tribes insurrected. I enticed them to

capitulate, resulting in the capitulation of almost eight hundred troops. On that day, I misled them and orchestrated their execution.”[4] This speech not only discloses his harshness towards prisoners of war but also, more significantly, unveils his pronounced self-will and overconfidence. He proceeded without an imperial edict delineating the protocol for managing the Qiang captives, constituting a significant political infraction. The principle of ‘not executing those who surrender’ has been a traditional norm in combat since antiquity. This strategy not only motivates adversaries to surrender promptly but also serves as a method for achieving greater triumph at a reduced expense. Furthermore, the killing of these defenceless non-combatants is deeply immoral and inconsistent with celestial values[6]. In summary, his actions—capturing the Prince of Liang’s decree, murdering the guards at Baling, and executing captured soldiers—revealed his deficiency in political astuteness, distancing him from his aspiration to be granted marquis status. Furthermore, his reticent disposition conflicted with the Confucian-influenced culture of the Han court, which prioritised ritual etiquette between ruler and subject. This hindered his ability to establish extensive political ties within the court, thereby obstructing his avenues for obtaining essential support.

Li Guang’s difficulty in obtaining a marquise was significantly attributed to his unique approach to combat, which contrasted with the strategies of the new generation of commanders under Emperor Wu, ultimately resulting

in his marginalisation. Under Emperor Wu's rule, the tactics against the Xiongnu transitioned from a defensive stance to proactive offensive operations. Generals such as Wei Qing and Huo Qubing often utilised surprise tactics, employing elite cavalry to swiftly breach enemy lines and execute rapid flanking manoeuvres to secure decisive wins by swift assaults[8]. Li Guang was a commander who gained notoriety within the defensive strategy concept of the early Han dynasty. His proficiency was in tactics like 'boundary defence,' 'ambushes,' and 'restricting distant expeditions,' making him ill-equipped for the offensive strategic theory adopted by Emperor Wu[9]. The continuous defeats and uninspiring performances in his campaigns progressively diminished Emperor Wu's interest in him. 'The Records of General Li Guang', preceding the significant battle in the fourth year of the Yuanshou era, document: 'Li Guang persistently requested to command the expedition.'[4]. The Emperor, deeming him excessively elderly, originally declined; only after considerable delay did he acquiesce, designating him as General of the Vanguard. This excerpt illustrates Emperor Wu's scepticism over Li Guang's ability. In the concluding campaign, General Guang's emotional eruption—departing without recognising the Grand General, his expression clouded with ire as he advanced to his headquarters—resulted in dire repercussions: the army lost its leader, and some deviated from the route and lagged behind the Grand General. This ultimately resulted in the tragic event of his unsheathing his blade and committing suicide[4]. Sima Qian suggests the paramount authority of senior leadership over a charismatic commander by noting that 'the Generalissimo sent his chief of staff to hastily summon Guang's headquarters for a clash.'[4].

Li Guang's personal nature and unique features fundamentally conflicted with several aspects of the Han dynasty's military merit system, political culture, and developing strategic methodologies.

#### **4. These Issues Collectively Led to His Inevitable 'Difficulty in Obtaining a Title'**

The tragedy of Li Guang's inability to secure a noble title fundamentally sprang from the discord between his individual abilities and the rigidly measurable military merit assessment system. The disparity between personal competence and organisational evaluation was a crucial element in his failure to obtain a title. The military merit rank system of the Han dynasty prioritised measurable fighting results, including specific prizes for 'decapitating foes and capturing prisoners.' Although Li Guang distinguished

himself as an archer and utilised individualised tactical strategies stemming from his confidence in his abilities, these tactics—which collectively formed a deterrent force that caused the Xiongnu to refrain from invading Right North Ping Commandery for several years—were challenging to convert into measurable military successes acknowledged by the system. The judgement delivered in the second year of the Yuanshou era — that Li Guang's forces had battled heroically yet received no recompense — was the ultimate resolution of this systemic paradox. Confronted with recurrent analogous results, what reflections must have occupied the mind of Li Guang, who had battled on the Xiongnu frontlines from his youth until his latter years? More significantly, when Li Guang expressed his sorrow, "Is my appearance unworthy of a marquis? Or is it merely destiny?"[4]. He had mistakenly ascribed the systemic issue to personal fate. This also illustrates the profound shaping of individual thought by the feudal society.

Sima Qian's depiction of Li Guang and the account of his destiny not only reflect deep empathy for the individual hero but also implicitly critique the inequities of his time, such as the draconian military meritocracy, nepotism, and the caprices of imperial favouritism. In contrast to the accolades bestowed upon Wei Qing as Grand General, when Li Guang sought military command, Emperor Wu of Han considered him too advanced in age and denied his request, privately advising Wei Qing: 'Do not allow him to confront the Xiongnu', subjectively assessing as too elderly to endure adversary while discreetly directing that Li Guang should not engage directly with the Xiongnu[4]. This sharply contrasted with the exceptional protection granted to Wei Qing as a commander by the imperial in-laws and the frigid greeting received by Li Guang. Every facet demonstrated how the emperor's individual predilections and aversions dictated the capricious selection of commanders. Following Li Guang's demise, all his officers and soldiers lamented. Upon receiving the news, the general populace—regardless of their acquaintance with him, whether youthful or elderly—was compelled to weep[4]. Every reader encountering this paragraph is likely to experience profound sorrow and empathy. Sima Qian's poignant portrayal of universal grieving, together with the ending parable that 'peach and plum trees talk not, yet roads form beneath them,' lauds Li Guang's genuine and modest character—one that inherently evokes loyalty without the necessity for ostentation[4]. During Emperor Wen's reign, when the state emphasised education over military endeavours, Li Guang became a hero without a purpose. Subsequently, during Emperor Jing's reign, Li Guang, unable to comprehend the sovereign's motives, found it challenging to secure the favour of his

superiors. Subsequently, Emperor Wu's reign commenced, characterised by a policy reversal and extensive military battles overseas. Regrettably, Li Guang had surpassed his prime, his mindset being conservative and inadequate for the exigencies of extensive incursions against the formidable Xiongnu forces. The hero failed to attain distinction, ultimately missing his opportunity amid the changing currents of history, resulting in a deep sigh echoing through time[10]. This commander, esteemed by his troops, survived a life of adversity and never attained a great title. The vicissitudes of fate, exacerbated by his ostracism from the elite aristocracy, ultimately compelled him to end his own life in profound fury. Li Guang's terrible demise imparts substantial political relevance to this biography, as articulated by Sima Qian. The final phrase, 'Though this statement is minor, it can show the broader truth,' utilises literary metaphor to raise Li Guang to a cultural figure, transcending particular historical assessment to achieve timeless artistic significance [4].

Ultimately, Li Guang's persona transformed into a cultural emblem, as the factors contributing to his 'difficulty in gaining a title' transcended individual circumstances, becoming a profound metaphor for the universal conflict between brilliance and systemic constraints. The lasting significance of Li Guang's image arises from its representation of the perpetual struggle between individual aptitude and institutional limitations in human society. Li Guang's experience of being unrecognised for his talents, having withstood the test of time, was widely commemorated by Tang dynasty writers who utilised it as a metaphor in their poetry. Tang literati referenced Li Guang in their poetry and prose, enabling him to articulate their own feelings of being 'unacknowledged'. Consequently, Li Guang transitioned from the Han dynasty to the Tang, moving from the Records of the Grand Historian to Tang poetry, thereby becoming an archetypal figure. He subsequently traversed the realm of Tang poetry to the current day, so enhancing the literary vision of Li Guang[11]. From the verse of the Tang dynasty, 'Have you not witnessed the anguish of battlefields?' General Li is still commemorated today. The Preface to the Pavilion of Prince Teng expresses sorrow that 'Feng Tang aged, yet Li Guang never attained his title,' illustrating how literati across generations have expressed their own frustrations regarding unrecognised talents through reflections on Li Guang. The formation of cultural memory has estranged Li Guang from his historical setting, becoming him a symbolic figure representing resistance to fate's unfairness and challenging the system's legitimacy. Through Sima Qian's literary depiction, Li Guang ultimately achieved a legacy more lasting than any marquise—immortality within the records of cultural transmission.

Li Guang's elusive honour transcends individual sorrow, serving as a cultural icon that highlights the persistent struggle between institutional reason and humanistic compassion in historical evaluation systems. This significant understanding is central to Sima Qian's historical narrative.

## 5. Conclusion

This study argues that Li Guang's inability to achieve the title of marquis was not simply a harsh twist of fate or personal tragedy, but rather the unavoidable result of complex tensions between his character and the political-military system of the Han dynasty. Sima Qian chronicled and illustrated a distinguished individual celebrated for his martial skills, marksmanship, and generosity towards his soldiers, but also highlighting his shortcomings: a tendency towards impulsiveness and a deficiency in political insight. Li Guang's character and tactical methodology, within the institutional framework of the Han dynasty—which prioritised measurable military merit and political affiliations—alongside the caprices of the imperial court, ultimately hindered his ambition to be granted the title of marquis.

The example of Li Guang exposes the intrinsic conflicts present in historical assessment frameworks. The institutional demands of Emperor Wu of Han's period necessitated measurable performance, however genuinely significant historical contributions frequently elude full quantification. The battlefield requires individualised military expertise, but bureaucracy promotes uniform operating protocols. Li Guang's tragedy was in the irreconcilable discord between his unique abilities and the institutionalised system of assessment. Sima Qian's literary method in historical writing objectively recorded this disparity while imparting moral and aesthetic importance to Li Guang through emotional projection. This elevated Li Guang's persona above that of a mere historical figure, bestowing upon him a cultural existence that surpasses the limitations of history.

This study provides a novel viewpoint on the phenomena of 'Li Guang's difficulty in achieving a title' by re-examining the language of the 'Biography of General Li.' This is not solely the personal experience of a historical figure but a quintessential example for analysing historical evaluation systems and reflecting on the interaction between the individual and the institutional framework. Sima Qian's excellence is in his capacity to honour historical accuracy while infusing history with human warmth via literary creativity, ensuring that a tragedy from two millennia past continues to resonate deeply in contemporary times. This serves as a reminder to historians that when

assessing historical characters, it is essential to consider both individual agency and institutional limitations, as well as historical rationality and humanistic sensibility, to achieve a more thorough and profound understanding.

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