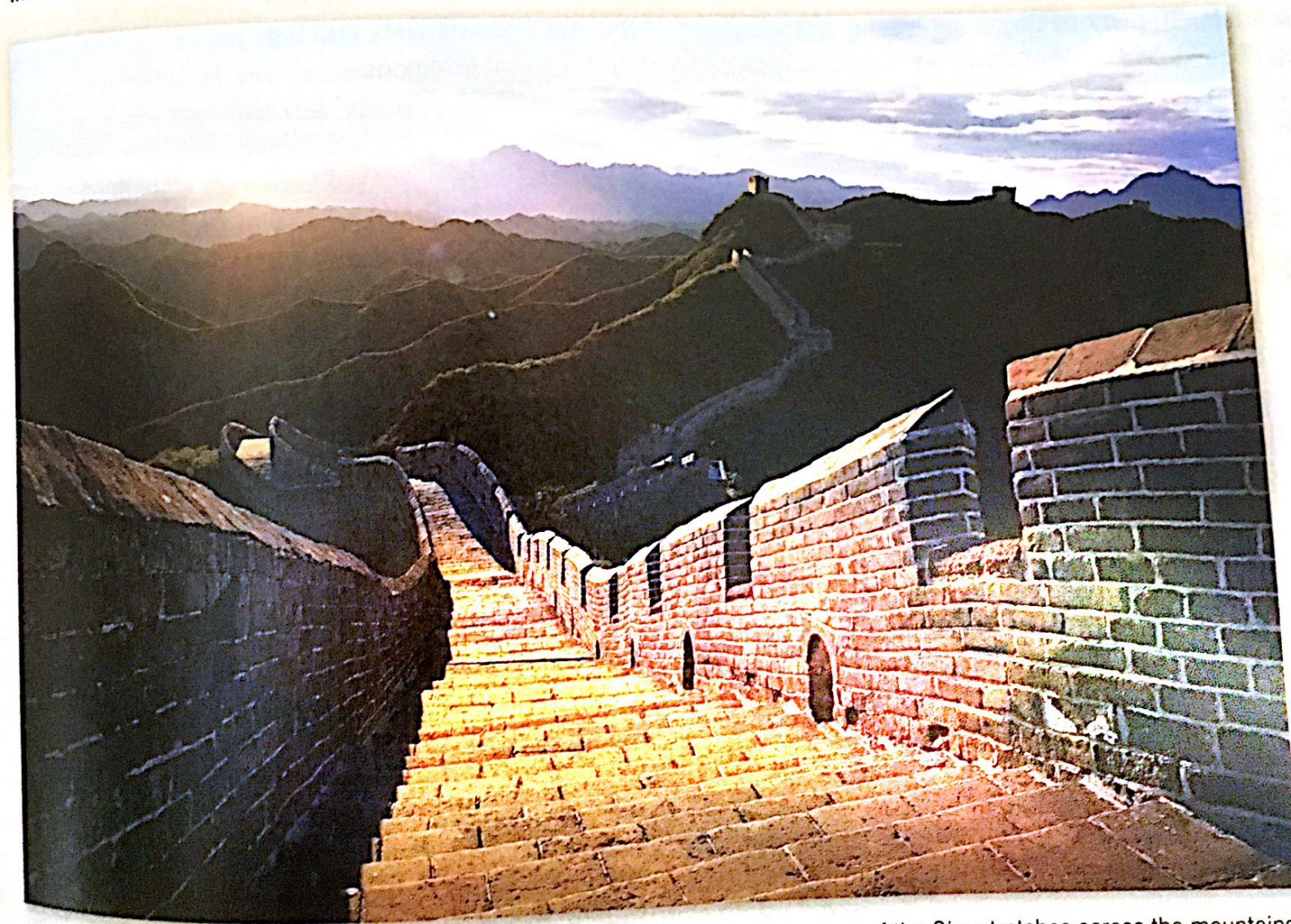


EYEWITNESS:

Sima Qian: Speaking Truth to Power in Han China

In about the year 99 B.C.E., Chinese imperial officials sentenced the historian Sima Qian to punishment by castration. Like his father before him, Sima Qian was the official astrologer and historian at the court of the Han dynasty in Chang'an. For more than a decade, he had worked diligently on a project that he had inherited from his father—a history of China from earliest times to his own day. This project brought Sima Qian high prominence at the imperial court. When he spoke in defense of a dishonored general, his views attracted widespread attention. When the emperor himself learned that Sima Qian had publicly expressed opinions



The Great Wall of China, the first version of which was constructed by the first emperor of the Qin, stretches across the mountains of northern China.

that contradicted his judgment, the emperor reacted furiously and ordered the historian to undergo the humiliating punishment.

Human castration was by no means uncommon in premodern times. Thousands of boys and young men of undistinguished birth underwent voluntary castration in China and many other lands in order to pursue careers as **eunuchs**. Since eunuchs could not sire families and build familial power bases to challenge established authorities, ruling elites often appointed eunuchs, rather than nobles, to sensitive posts. However, as personal servants of ruling elites, eunuchs sometimes came to wield enormous power within a ruling house because of their influence with rulers and their families.

Exemplary punishment was not an appealing alternative, however, to educated elites and other prominent individuals: when sentenced to punitive castration, Chinese men of honor normally avoided the penalty by taking their own lives. Yet Sima Qian chose to endure his punishment. In a letter to a friend, he explained that an early death by suicide would mean that work only he was capable of producing would go forever unwritten. To transmit his understanding of the Chinese past, Sima Qian opted to live and work in disgrace until his death about 90 B.C.E.

During his last years Sima Qian completed a massive work consisting of 130 chapters, most of which survive. He consulted court documents and the historical works of his predecessors, and when writing about his own age he supplemented those sources with personal observations and information gleaned from political and military figures who played leading roles in Chinese society. He composed historical accounts of the emperors' reigns and biographical sketches of notable figures, including ministers, statesmen, generals, empresses, aristocrats, scholars, officials, merchants, and rebels. He even described the societies of neighboring peoples with whom the Chinese sometimes conducted trade and sometimes made war. The work of the disgraced but conscientious scholar Sima Qian provides the best information available about the development of early imperial China.

A rich body of political and social thought prepared the way for the unification of China under the Qin and Han dynasties. Confucians, Daoists, Legalists, and others formed schools of thought and worked to bring political and social stability to China during the chaotic years of the late Zhou dynasty and the Period of the Warring States, and profoundly influenced Chinese political and cultural traditions.