Sima Qian 司馬遷 has been credited not only with writing exhilarating historical prose, but also with setting the basic format for all subsequent dynastic histories by dividing his Shi ji 史記 into five parts: the “Basic Annals” (benji 本紀), the “Tables” (biao 表), the Treatises (shu 書), the “Hereditary Houses” (shijia 世家), and the “Biographies” (liezhuan 列傳). Of these five parts, the “Hereditary Houses,” dealing with pre-imperial history, were discontinued in later dynastic histories. As for the Tables, the form was dropped in Hou Hanshu 後漢書 only to be taken up again in Xin Tangshu 新唐書 and subsequent dynastic histories. The Tables in Shi ji have not often been the focus of study in their own right: scholars may draw upon individual tables to verify a name or a date, to make a table of their own, or to supplement or correct information found elsewhere in Shi ji, but they tend to regard the Tables more as useful tools than as attractive “texts.” Mansvelt Beck, for example, writing on the divisions within the Dynastic Histories generally, states that “From a technical point of view the fourth part—called Tables—is superfluous, because all the dates in it—of appointments, enfeoffments, and other acts of state—should also be found in the three preceding parts.” This view, I will argue, does not do justice to the Tables in Shi ji. Rather than being dull collections of data, I take the Tables (henceforth biao) to be filled with a strong, perhaps unsuspected, rhetorical power, and to contain strong authorial intent.

A comparison with the Chunqiu 春秋 (the Annals) may clarify

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2 Mansvelt Beck 1990: 1. There are, however, several instances in which the tables, contra Mansvelt Beck, do include information not found elsewhere, see Loewe 2004: 251. Watson (1993) translates the prefaces to tables 3, 5, 6 and 7, but does not include the tables themselves in his translation. Édouard Chavannes (1967: 1–200) awards the tables a much fuller treatment: besides translating all available prefaces, he translates some of the content of the tables, and derives from them a number of tables and lists of his own.
what I mean. Numerous times the *Chunqiu* has been described as a dry-as-dust chronicle, and, in origin, the text may have been just that. Still, even before the Western Han period, the *Chunqiu* fascinated scholars like no other work, and was seen as a text instilled by the great sage Confucius with hidden meanings and moral lessons that had to be carefully recovered. Sima Qian himself, in the preface to the second table, presents the *Chunqiu* as a text that, in a time of great chaos and decline, manages to recapture the essence of the greatness of the Zhou 周. Although Sima Qian does not make the analogy explicit, we may read the biao in the manner that he reads the *Chunqiu*: as a series of texts/charts so constructed as to preserve something essential about the past that Sima Qian feels is on the verge of getting lost. I see Sima Qian’s biao as representing a double act of remembrance. First, the biao remember a great institution of the past: the institution whereby a ruler did not rule all the land himself, but doled out parts of it, on a hereditary basis, to members of his family, and to meritorious ministers. Although this institution had its problems (as, at times, the branches overwhelmed the root), it also created an image of China as a place where family relationships mattered, and where rulership was shared. The biao show, both with words and visually, how, in the second century BC, this system had lost its vitality. Second, they also remember the individuals who are listed in the various biao, especially the kings and marquises of the first century of the Han 漢 dynasty (202 BC–AD 220) who were swept up in this moribund system, and, more often than not, did not get a chance to make their mark.

In total there are ten biao in *Shiji*: the first four treat pre-Han history; the last six deal with the first century of the Han dynasty. The titles of the tables suggest that the tables are of three different types: *shibiao* 世表 (“generation tables”), *yuebiao* 月表 (“month tables”) and *nianbiao* 年表 (“year tables”); these distinctions indicate whether the tables move forward in time by generation, by month, or by year.\(^3\) An alternative distinction, one not reflected in the titles of the biao, would distinguish between “horizontal” and “vertical” tables.\(^4\) In tables of the horizontal type, one follows what happened over time to the units listed at the very right hand side of the document (descendants of the Yellow Thearch and his seven sons for table 1, states for

\(^3\) Of these, tables 6 through 9 are not really year tables, as they move forward in time by reign periods, not by years.

\(^4\) I adopt this terminology from Loewe (2004: 210–214).