

LITERATURE AND HUMANITIES 1

Assignment 2: Formulating a Question

Word Limit	1000–1200 words
Weighting	20% of overall course grade
Presentation	MS Word document (no PDFs); regular font size (e.g. Times New Roman 12) with double-spaced text; indent the first line of each new paragraph and do not include any blank space between paragraphs; do include an essay title, page numbers, and a Works Cited page
Deadline and Submission Instructions	11:59pm on Saturday, 2 November ; upload your Word documents to Canvas

The goal of this assignment is for you to improve your ability to formulate the questions that lead to a successful essay, since any essay is only ever as good as the question(s) it tries to address. In that spirit, you will craft a short essay that sets out an issue, in the form of a question, and then offers a response to that question.

For this assignment, you may focus on either the *Epic of Sundiata*, Sima Qian, or the *Malay Annals*. The issue around which you tailor your question should extend beyond a single episode/section of a work to embrace something that runs through the work more broadly.

Whatever text and issue you choose, the following structure will be useful in helping you to organise your discussion:

- (1) **Title:** Announce the Question. Choose a title for your assignment, in the form of a question, which reflects the issue neatly and precisely.
- (2) **Beginning:** Explain and Justify the Question. In this section, describe the issue and justify why it is an issue in which the text is invested: in other words, *in what ways* does the text indicate that your chosen issue is worthy of discussion? Suggest briefly a possible answer.
- (3) **Middle:** Depending on the issue you choose, there may be a number of ways to explore the answer to your question. You will not have time to explore all possible responses, so choose evidence that supports what you consider to be the strongest responses. This may well involve weighing up the pros and cons of any one response.
- (4) **End:** Practice a conclusion that does not just restate the simple answer you formulated in part 2 above. Show how your discussion in part 3 has deepened and/or complicated your initial answer.

You will, of course, need to refer directly to the text to back up your points. An appropriate referencing style for each of the texts would be:

Sundiata work + page number(s): e.g. '*Sundiata*, p.24'; '*Sundiata*, pp. 35-42'.

Sima Qian work name (or recognisable shortened form) + page number(s): e.g. '*Letter to Ren An*, p.231'; '*Basic Annals of Emperor Gaozu*, pp. 55-60'; '*Gaozu*, pp. 55-60'.

Malay Annals work + page number(s): e.g. '*Malay Annals*, pp. 25-7'.

For an assignment of this type, you do not need to consult secondary scholarly literature. You should base your ideas on your own reading of the set text and, where appropriate, the associated seminar discussion.

FURTHER GUIDANCE

Choice of Topic

You want to select an issue that is both manageable in a short assignment of 1000-1200 words and genuine: something that resists a simple answer, something (a particular theme/episode/character etc.) that is problematic, inconsistent, or otherwise intriguing in the text. By the same token, you want to choose something that does not rely on knowledge systems outside the world of the text and outside the lectures and associated seminar discussions.

Pitch

For an academic essay, you should typically think of your reader as a knowledgeable peer. Therefore, you can assume that he/she has a basic familiarity with your text who is looking for guidance on the specific question that you raise.

Relevance

Everything you say should shed light on the issue you have chosen. Any extraneous information or discussion, however interesting in itself, will detract from your focus and may confuse the reader. [PS. Avoid the temptation to use footnotes as storehouses for extraneous information!]

Grading Rubric

The following general rubric applies to assignments in Lit-Hums 1:

'A' range work demonstrates sophistication and depth in analysis; compelling and reflective expression; insightful and original perspectives; professional polish in terms of presentation and referencing.

'B' range work demonstrates good comprehension of the materials; earnest engagement; shows potential to develop further in expression or perspective.

'C' range work and below indicates scope for improvement in a number of aspects as indicated by your seminar professor.

[Student name]

Professor [Name]

Literature and Humanities 1

[Date]

How are tensions in power relations between characters brought out
in Sima Qian's writings?

Primarily a historical record, Sima Qian's writings in *Shi Ji* naturally follow the lives of monarchs and people of power around them. However, power relations between the characters in his writings are often not straightforward. In particular, the events under *The Biography of the Marquis of Huai-yin (Han Hsin)* are of interest because power relations surrounding the character Han Hsin tend to fluctuate greatly. With this chapter under consideration, I argue that tensions in power relations are brought out when power oscillates between two parties, such that who is truly in control becomes debatable. In this essay, I will focus on three instances of tension in power relations, beginning with tension between Han Hsin and the people, subsequently the tension between Han Hsin and his enemies, and finally, the tension between Han Hsin and his king.

The first instance is observed between Han Hsin and the people. In a relationship of society and the individual, it is natural to assume the former, being more numerous, as more powerful. The Huai-yin villagers exert their power upon Han Hsin during the episode when Han Hsin is made to crawl between the legs of a young butcher who takes the lead in ridiculing him. The villagers appear more powerful through repetition of insulting and derogatory words "coward" and "nothing" which carry a tone of putting someone in their rightful (lower) place (*Han Hsin*, pp. 209). Their power is further emphasised through the setting, of which the humiliation takes place "in front of a crowd of people" akin to a public spectacle where Han Hsin is an object for ridicule (*Han Hsin*, pp. 209). Han Hsin's powerlessness is also exemplified by the gap in dialogue, whereby Han Hsin is a mute character in this episode, portraying him as accepting and subservient-like when he obeys the

young butcher. Meanwhile, Han Hsin's lack of response can also be interpreted as a sign of strength if we consider later events. The battle with Chao parallels the Huai-yin episode where Han Hsin (and his forces) are likewise silent yet the latter eventually wins "deceptively" (*Han Hsin*, pp. 216), suggesting the casting aside of dignity and silence as long-sighted endurance for a more decisive comeback – a sign of wit. The people's mocking thus becomes more of loquaciousness and the stark contrast between them and Han Hsin marks the sharp difference between their intelligence. This applies for the young butcher's case as well, for we learn the sense of ease Han Hsin expressed through the words "of course" when he mentioned the possibility of killing him during the ridicule episode yet actively "put[ting] up" with it portrays Han Hsin as self-confident and in control (*Han Hsin*, pp. 228). It begs the question who is truly more powerful due to these disparities in virtues, thus causing a tension in the relation of power between Han Hsin and the people.

The second instance of tension in power occurs between Han Hsin and his enemies. In the case concerning Lord of Kuang-wu, their relationship is one of captor and prisoner. Through the victorious Han Hsin's commanding tone in words like "issued orders" and "questioned", the captured Lord of Kuang-wu's polite and non-assertive words like "suggested", "beg" and "in my humble opinion" alongside self-deprecating words "defeat" and "not qualified" (*Han Hsin*, pp. 216-218), their relation seems clearly distinguished whereby Han Hsin is more powerful than Lord of Kuang-wu. However, this is made complex as Han Hsin asked Lord of Kuang-wu for advice in a diplomatic manner. From how Han Hsin took the trouble to sit Lord of Kuang-wu in the "seat of honour" befitting a "teacher" (*Han Hsin*, pp. 216), he is giving a supposed enemy respect and recognition. Han Hsin's diction also includes "beg" (similarly used by Lord of Kuang-wu), "honour of waiting upon [Lord of Kuang-wu]" and repeated use of "listened" (*Han Hsin*, pp. 217). All of which effectively humbles Han Hsin's position to that of an inadequate and reverent student which in doing so elevates Lord of Kuang-wu's status. From this, it is evident their power relation is of captor-and-prisoner yet something more at the same time. Hence, whether Han Hsin or his enemy

holds more power in said context is debatable and this complicates the power relation between them.

The third instance that showcases this recurring tension in power falls between Han Hsin and his king, Gaozu (also referred to as King of Han). Between a king and his subject, it is natural to assume Gaozu as the authority figure of the two. Indeed, through Han Hsin's subservient attitude – seen from his action of “bow[ing]” (*Han Hsin*, pp. 211), his worry of territory being taken “away from him” (*Han Hsin*, pp. 227), his gratitude in repeatedly emphasising Gaozu sharing “his own” possessions (*Han Hsin*, pp. 225), and how he established himself as “prisoner” to Gaozu (*Han Hsin*, pp. 230), it is clear Han Hsin views himself as subject to the king who has power over his life and possessions, a relationship driven by a mix of fear and loyalty. Yet tension arises because Gaozu's behaviour reflects otherwise. During the fourth year of Han, Gaozu voices his frustration with seemingly childish “curs[ing]” of Han Hsin for not “com[ing] to aid [him]” despite “hoping day and night” (*Han Hsin*, pp. 222). This attitude paints Gaozu as powerless without Han Hsin, so much that he can only engage in passive longing for support from the more powerful. The alliteration of “f” sounds from Gaozu being “finally forced to flee” after being cornered in the battles with Ch'u conveys a sense of resignation in line with how Gaozu “feared and hated [Han Hsin's] ability” (*Han Hsin*, pp. 224 and 229). Han Hsin is further elevated in K'uai T'ung's counsel. K'uai T'ung repeats the phrase “the fate of these two kings lies with you” to stress Han Hsin as pivotal to the Han-Chu struggle; his doubling of the future tense phrase “will win” conveys a sense of certainty and dispels doubt in Han Hsin's power and influence (*Han Hsin*, pp. 223-224). K'uai T'ung's use of hyperbole “the whole world will respond to your call” further raises Han Hsin to a god-like status which culminates with Gaozu installing Han Hsin as a legitimate king (*Han Hsin*, pp. 222 and 225). From these opposing evidences, we come to question if the kingship Gaozu holds truly makes him stronger than Han Hsin, or if the latter's merit in warfare overshadows his king and thus pushes the power balance in his favour, thus evoking tension.

To summarise, the abovementioned instances provoke further thought on what we as readers may initially assume about the more powerful as recorded by Sima Qian. Through various literary and dramatic techniques, tensions between various figures of power take shape. In a sense, I believe this also makes Sima Qian's writings more nuanced through the revelation that these are very real historical characters who are often very complex after all. Such examination on their complicated power relations may thus shed light on various significant power struggles which are probably what makes history dynamic and interesting to begin with.

[1183 Words]

Works Cited

Sima Qian. "Shi Ji 92: The Biography of the Marquis of Huai-yin (Han Hsin)." In *Records of the Historian: Chapters from the Shih Chi*, translated by Burton Watson and Kametarao Takigawa, 208-232. New York City: Columbia University Press, 1969.

Hi [name],

This essay offers a clearly written, insightful perspective on the biography of Han Hsin. Your close reading is as painstaking as it is compelling, accumulating persuasive evidence in support of your overarching point that power is always in flux within Sima Qian, and that whoever readers “initially assume” is more powerful may not actually be the person in charge.

One of this essay’s many strengths is that it is neatly structured, and I hesitate to provide feedback that might make your next one less so. A reader should be able to get the gist of an essay just from reading its introduction and the first sentence of each of its body paragraphs, and your essay does exactly what it is supposed to do: it captures its main idea in the introduction, and then moves methodically through the first, second, and third tensions. However, the effect of this methodical movement through first, second, and third points comes across as ever so slightly mechanical (even though, once again, you are doing exactly what you are supposed to).

Thus, in your final paper, assuming that you choose the academic writing option, you could try devising three main points that, rather than being separately categorized as first, second, and third, achieve a kind of snowballing effect instead, with the second point building up on the first, and the third point building upon the first and second, each new point taking what has come before and growing it in complexity. This would mean that, rather than arriving at the conclusion with the argument fundamentally unchanged, your argument would evolve over the course of the paper instead, with the paper’s overall trajectory being an exercise in gradually heightening rigor.

Alternatively, since this essay suggests that you’re already good at academic writing, you could try stretching yourself in a different direction by choosing the creative option. Trying creative writing for a change might also help make your future academic writing less mechanical, while still retaining its strengths: the clarity of your sentences, the tidiness of your organization, and the originality of your ideas.

Shadow grade: A