CHINA SERIES · BOOK TEN

Emperor Wu of Han

The Expansionist Emperor of the Han Dynasty — The Emperor Who Expanded China's Frontiers, Opened the Silk Road, and Established a Powerful and Enduring Empire

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Free Sample · Chapter One

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Chapter One

The Eleventh Son

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The World He Was Born Into

When Liu Che was born in 156 BCE, the Han dynasty was forty-six years old and still felt, to many of the people who lived under it, like a fragile arrangement.

Its founder, Liu Bang, had been a minor village official in the old state of Chu, a man of humble birth and large appetites who rose through the chaos that followed the collapse of the Qin empire. The Qin had unified the Chinese world in 221 BCE under the ruler who called himself the First Emperor. It had standardized script, weights, measures, coinage, and axle widths; it had abolished the old feudal states and divided the realm into commanderies run by appointed officials; it had linked older walls along the northern frontier into the barrier later generations would call the Great Wall. And it had fallen apart within fifteen years of its founder's death, consumed by rebellion against its harsh laws, heavy labor levies, and the incompetence of its second ruler.

Liu Bang won the long civil war that followed, defeating his great rival Xiang Yu in 202 BCE, and took the title of emperor. He is remembered as Gaozu, the High Ancestor. He was shrewd enough to see that the Qin had not failed because unification was a mistake. It had failed because it had governed too harshly, too quickly, and without allies. So he kept the Qin structure of commanderies and counties in the western half of the realm, the old heartland around the capital, while in the east he granted large kingdoms to his generals and then, after eliminating most of them, to his own brothers and sons. The result was a hybrid: an empire in the west and a federation of

semi-independent kingdoms in the east, held together by family ties and the authority of the throne at Chang'an.

The new capital stood on the south bank of the Wei River, close to the ruins of the Qin capital Xianyang. Its name meant "Lasting Peace." Its great palaces, the Changle, "Lasting Joy," and the Weiyang, "Not Yet Ending," rose on platforms of rammed earth above the city. Within those walls the Han court would play out its dramas for two centuries.

Gaozu also inherited a problem the Qin had never solved: the steppe. To the north, beyond the walls and the loess highlands, the nomadic peoples of the grasslands had recently been united by a brilliant and ruthless leader named Modu, who had killed his own father to take power and forged the Xiongnu into the first great steppe empire. In 200 BCE Gaozu marched north against them with a large army and was surrounded at a place called Baideng, near the modern city of Datong. He escaped, by most accounts, only after his envoys bribed the chief consort of the Xiongnu ruler. The humiliation shaped Han policy for the next two generations.

The policy that emerged was called heqin, "harmonious kinship." The Han would send a princess of the imperial family, or a girl given that rank, to marry the Xiongnu ruler, the chanyu. Each year the Han would send gifts of silk, grain, wine, and other goods. The two powers would treat each other as brothers. In return the Xiongnu were supposed to refrain from raiding. In practice the raids never entirely stopped, and the gifts grew larger. It was, in the frank assessment of some Han statesmen, a kind of tribute paid by the settled empire to the nomads. But it bought time, and time was what the young dynasty needed.

The Years of Rest

After Gaozu's death in 195 BCE, real power passed to his widow, the Empress Lü, one of the most formidable women in Chinese history. She dominated the court for fifteen years and tried to entrench her own family. When she died in 180 BCE, the old generals and ministers of the founding generation struck at once, massacred the Lü clan, and chose as emperor one of Gaozu's surviving sons, the King of Dai, a quiet man who had governed a frontier kingdom without drawing attention to himself. He is known to history as Emperor Wen, the Cultured Emperor, and his reign from 180 to 157 BCE became, in later memory, a golden age.

Emperor Wen governed lightly. He reduced the land tax, at one point remitting it entirely for years at a time. He abolished mutilating punishments, after a moving petition from a girl who offered to become a government slave to redeem her father from the knife. He lived frugally, and was said to have abandoned plans for a terrace when told it would cost as much as the property of ten middle-income families. He avoided war with the Xiongnu and sent them letters addressed with elaborate courtesy. He let the kingdoms in the east manage their own affairs.

The guiding philosophy of the court in these decades was called Huang-Lao, after the Yellow Emperor, the legendary sage-ruler, and Laozi, the reputed author of the Daodejing. Huang-Lao teaching held that the wise ruler governs by not interfering, by wu wei, "non-action," letting the natural order of things restore itself. It valued frugality, quietude, and a minimum of laws. After the wars of the Qin collapse, when the population had been devastated and the economy wrecked, this was not merely a philosophy but a practical program. The fields were left to recover. The people were left to multiply.

It worked. By the time of Emperor Wen's death, the granaries were full and the treasuries were heavy. Sima Qian, writing later, gives a

famous picture of the wealth that had accumulated by the early years of Emperor Wu: the strings that held the coins in the capital's vaults had rotted so that the coins could not be counted, and the grain in the great granaries was piled so high that it spilled out and lay rotting in the open. Horses grazed in the lanes, and people who rode mares to gatherings were looked down upon. Even allowing for a historian's flourish, the picture tells us something real. The patient years had produced a surplus. That surplus was the inheritance Liu Che would spend.

The Grandmother

The most important person at court during Liu Che's childhood was not his father. It was his grandmother.

Her name was Dou Yifang. She had entered the palace as a young woman of humble origins and been sent, with other palace women, to serve the King of Dai. That was a stroke of luck: the king became Emperor Wen, and she became his empress. In her later years she lost her sight, but not her authority. As empress dowager under her son Emperor Jing, and then as grand empress dowager under her grandson, she was the dominant figure in the inner palace for decades.

She was a devoted follower of Huang-Lao teaching. She required her son and the members of the Dou family to study the works of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi. She was suspicious of the Confucian scholars, whom she regarded as fussy, ambitious, and given to elaborate ritual schemes that cost money and stirred up trouble. One celebrated story tells how she summoned a Confucian scholar named Yuan Gu and asked his opinion of the Laozi. He replied, with more courage than tact, that it was the sort of book servants read. The furious empress dowager had him thrown into a pen with a wild boar. Emperor Jing, who thought the scholar had been honest rather than criminal, quietly passed him a sharp blade, and the old man killed the

animal with a single thrust to the heart. The empress dowager could say nothing more, and let the matter drop.

The story captures the atmosphere of the court in which Liu Che grew up: a court where intellectual disagreements could become matters of life and death, and where the ultimate arbiter of what could be said was an old blind woman in the Changle Palace.

The Mother

Liu Che's mother was a woman named Wang Zhi, and her story is one of the most remarkable in a period full of remarkable women.

She came from a family of no particular standing in the region of the capital. Her mother, Zang Er, was a granddaughter of Zang Tu, who had briefly been King of Yan in the turmoil after the Qin collapse, but the family had long since fallen from any prominence. Wang Zhi was married first to a commoner named Jin Wangsun and bore him a daughter. Then, according to the histories, a fortune-teller told her mother that both her daughters were destined for great nobility. The mother took Wang Zhi away from her husband, over his protests, and placed her in the household of the crown prince, Liu Qi, the future Emperor Jing. Her younger sister followed her into the palace.

That a woman who had already been married and had borne a child could enter the harem of the heir to the throne tells us something about the fluidity of the early Han, when the dynasty's founders were themselves only a generation removed from the village. That she should rise to become empress tells us something about her.

Wang Zhi bore the prince three daughters. Then, the histories tell us, she dreamed that the sun entered her womb. She told the prince, who declared it a sign of great nobility. The child born after that dream, in the year Emperor Wen died and her husband ascended the throne, was a son. He was named Liu Che. The character che can be read as "thorough" or "penetrating," and some later tellers associated it with a further dream in which a red pig, or a red dragon, descended into a

palace hall. Like the golden house, such omen stories were the kind of thing that gathered around emperors after the fact. What is certain is that the boy was born in 156 BCE and that he was the tenth son of Emperor Jing to be counted in some reckonings and the eleventh in others. The difference depends on how one counts brothers who died young, and the tradition has generally settled on calling him the eleventh.

Eleventh sons do not normally become emperors. That Liu Che did is in large part the achievement of his mother.

The Kingdoms and the Rebellion

The year after Liu Che was born, his father's reign entered its first great crisis.

Emperor Jing had inherited the problem of the eastern kingdoms. By his time they were no longer ruled by Gaozu's brothers and sons but by their descendants, who felt a weaker bond to the throne and a stronger attachment to their own revenues. Some of them were very rich. The King of Wu, Liu Pi, a nephew of Gaozu, ruled a coastal kingdom in the lower Yangtze region with copper mines and salt pans. He minted his own coins and boiled sea water into salt, and with these revenues he could afford to exempt his own people from taxes and attract fugitives from across the empire. He also nursed a personal grievance: years earlier his son and heir, visiting the capital, had quarreled over a board game with the young Liu Qi, the future Emperor Jing, who had struck him with the game board and killed him.

Emperor Jing's chief adviser, a brilliant and abrasive official named Chao Cuo, had long argued that the kingdoms were a mortal danger. If the throne reduced their territory, he said, they would rebel. If it did not, they would rebel anyway, only later and with more power. Better that they rebel now, when the court was strong. Emperor Jing

accepted his advice and began confiscating counties from the kingdoms on various pretexts.

In 154 BCE the King of Wu rose in revolt and was joined by six other kingdoms, including Chu and several states in the old region of Qi. This was the Rebellion of the Seven Kingdoms. The rebels claimed that they were not rebelling against the emperor at all but only seeking to punish the evil minister Chao Cuo. In a moment of panic, Emperor Jing was persuaded by Chao Cuo's enemies to sacrifice him. Chao Cuo was summoned in his court robes, apparently believing he was going to an audience, and was cut in two in the eastern marketplace of Chang'an. His family was exterminated.

It did no good. The rebels did not lay down their arms. The rebellion was crushed instead by force, in about three months, by the general Zhou Yafu, who refused to rush to the relief of the besieged Kingdom of Liang and instead cut the rebels' supply lines, waiting until hunger broke their armies. The King of Wu fled south and was killed by people who had been his allies. The other kings committed suicide or were executed.

Liu Che was an infant during these events. But the rebellion shaped the world he would inherit and the lessons he would draw from it. After 154 BCE, Emperor Jing steadily reduced the kingdoms. Kings lost the right to appoint their own senior officials. Their territories shrank. The court began to treat them less as partners and more as dangerous relatives to be watched. The young prince grew up in a court that had learned, at a terrible cost, that shared blood was no guarantee of loyalty. When he became emperor, he would complete his father's work, and he would complete it in a way that did not require another civil war.

The Prince of Jiaodong

In 153 BCE, when Liu Che was about three years old by Western reckoning, Emperor Jing named his eldest son, Liu Rong, as crown prince. At the same time several of his other sons were given kingdoms. Liu Che was made King of Jiaodong, a small kingdom on the Shandong peninsula. It was a modest title for a modest position. He was one son among many, the child of a consort who was not the empress.

The empress at that time was a woman of the Bo family, chosen for Emperor Jing by his grandmother. She had no sons and no favor with her husband, and in 151 BCE she was deposed. Her removal opened the most important question at court: who would be the next empress? The obvious candidate was the mother of the crown prince, a consort named Li Ji. Once her son became emperor, she would become empress dowager, the most powerful woman in the realm.

Into this situation stepped the Princess of Guantao. She had a daughter to marry, and the logical match was the crown prince. She approached Li Ji with the offer. Li Ji refused.

The refusal had its reasons. The Princess of Guantao had made herself useful to her brother the emperor by presenting him with beautiful women for his harem. Li Ji, who was jealous of these rivals and had lost her husband's favor to them, resented the princess for it. She turned down the marriage. It was one of the great miscalculations in Han history.

The princess, rebuffed, turned to Wang Zhi, who was everything Li Ji was not: patient, flattering, and willing. Wang Zhi accepted the match between Ajiao and her son Liu Che. From that moment the Princess of Guantao and Wang Zhi were allies, and the princess set about destroying the crown prince's mother.

This is where the legend of the golden house belongs, as a charming gloss on a cold transaction. Whatever the little boy actually said on his

aunt's lap, the marriage alliance was made because his mother needed the princess and the princess needed a son-in-law with a future. The princess had access to her brother at all hours and to her mother the empress dowager. She used it. She praised Liu Che constantly and spoke ill of Li Ji constantly, telling the emperor that the crown prince's mother was spiteful, that she cursed the other palace ladies behind their backs, and that she practiced sorcery against them.

The story of how this campaign succeeded belongs to the next chapter. But the essential lesson was already being taught to the boy at the center of it. In the palace of Chang'an, the great matters of state were decided by marriages, by the favor and disfavor of women, by whispered accusations of witchcraft. Liu Che absorbed this lesson so thoroughly that he would one day destroy his own first empress on precisely such an accusation, and, much later, would lose his son to a witchcraft panic of his own making.

A Child Among Scholars and Soldiers

What kind of boy was he? The histories tell us less than we would wish. They record that he was intelligent and quick, that he loved to read, and that he showed an early taste for literature, especially for the rhapsodies, the long, ornate poems called fu, that were becoming fashionable at the courts of the kings. We know that he was tutored by men chosen by his father, and that among them was a Confucian scholar named Wang Zang, who would later play a fateful role in the first months of his reign. We know that he grew up in the shadow of his grandmother's Huang-Lao convictions but that his own tastes ran in another direction, toward the grand, the ceremonial, and the ambitious.

We also know that he grew up in a court that was anxious about the north. Throughout Emperor Jing's reign the Xiongnu continued to raid the frontier. The heqin treaties were renewed, princesses were sent, and gifts were delivered, but the raids continued. In 158 BCE,

two years before Liu Che was born, Xiongnu horsemen had come close enough to the capital that beacon fires were seen in Chang'an. The frontier commanderies lived in a state of constant alert. Generals such as Li Guang, a superb archer who would become a legendary figure in Liu Che's reign, spent their careers fighting small actions along the border, winning fame but never decisive results.

The boy who listened to these reports grew up believing, as many of the younger men at court were coming to believe, that the heqin policy was a humiliation. The empire had grown rich. Its population had recovered. Its horse herds had multiplied. Why should the Son of Heaven send his kinswomen and his silk to the barbarians, and still suffer their raids? It was a question that would define his reign.

But that lay in the future. For now he was a small boy with a small kingdom, a clever mother, a powerful aunt, and a betrothed cousin. He was not yet heir to anything. The great question of the succession was still open, and the women of the palace were deciding it.

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