CHINA SERIES · BOOK ELEVEN

Liu Bang

Emperor Gaozu of Han — The Founder of the Great Han Dynasty

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Free Sample · Chapter One

China Series · Book Eleven · Available March 26, 2027

International Publishing Corporation

Washington, D.C.

PART ONE

The Founder

開國之君

Chapter One

The Constable of Sishui

泗水亭長

A Village on the Plain

The county of Pei lay in the flat, well-watered country between the Yellow River and the Huai, in what is today the northwest corner of Jiangsu province, near its borders with Shandong, Henan, and Anhui. It was ancient farmland, crossed by rivers and marshes, densely populated, prone to floods. In the third century BCE it was frontier territory in more than one sense. Politically, it had passed back and forth between the great states of the Warring States period—Song, Wei, Qi, and finally Chu, the vast southern kingdom whose people had their own dialect, their own gods, their own poetry, and their own fierce pride. Culturally, it lay where the ritual-minded north, the homeland of Confucius only a few days' walk away, met the shamanistic and romantic south.

Within Pei county lay the township of Feng, and within Feng the village of Zhongyang, "Middle Yang." There, in a family of farmers named Liu, a boy was born. The traditional histories give no exact date. Later scholars, working from conflicting statements about his age at death, have proposed either 256 or 247 BCE; neither can be proved. What matters is that he was born in the last decades of the Warring States, a time of incessant war between the seven great

kingdoms, and that he grew up as the armies of Qin, the most ruthlessly organized of those kingdoms, advanced eastward toward his home.

His father was known simply as Taigong, "the Old Gentleman," and his mother as Liu Ao, "the Old Lady Liu." These are not names but titles of respect; the histories, which recorded the genealogies of nobles with meticulous care, did not trouble to remember the given names of an obscure farming couple. That silence is itself a kind of evidence. Liu Bang came from people who were not supposed to matter.

He was the third or fourth son. The family called him Ji (季), which means "the youngest" or "the last-born" among brothers. It was less a name than a position in the family, like calling a boy "Junior." Bang (邦), the name by which he is known to history, means "state" or "country," and some scholars suspect it was adopted or bestowed later, when he had become a man of consequence. In the sources of his own lifetime, his peers addressed him as Liu Ji.

The Dragon and the Storm

Sima Qian opens his account of Liu Bang's life with a story.

Once, he writes, Liu Bang's mother was resting on the bank of a large pond, and she dreamed that she encountered a god. At that moment there was thunder and lightning and the sky grew dark. Her husband went to look for her and saw a dragon coiled above her. Soon afterward she became pregnant and gave birth to Liu Bang.

The story belongs to an ancient and widespread pattern. Founders of dynasties in China, as elsewhere, were often given miraculous conceptions: the ancestor of the Shang royal house was conceived when his mother swallowed the egg of a dark bird; the ancestor of the Zhou when his mother stepped in the footprint of a god. The dragon in particular was associated with rain, water, and the vital energies of Heaven, and it would become, under the Han, the special emblem of

the emperor. The story of Liu Ao's dream was certainly circulated by the Han court, and perhaps first told by Liu Bang himself or by his followers once his fortunes had begun to rise. A man with no noble ancestors needed a heavenly one.

Sima Qian also tells us that Liu Bang had a prominent nose, a "dragon forehead," a handsome beard, and seventy-two black moles on his left thigh. Whether these details came from palace tradition or from physiognomists eager to read greatness into his features, they fixed his image in the imagination of later generations. But the historian was too honest, or too mischievous, to leave the portrait at that. In the very next breath he tells us what kind of young man Liu Bang actually was.

The Good-for-Nothing

He was, Sima Qian says, "kindly and fond of others, generous and open-minded," and he had "a great breadth of spirit." But he refused to do the ordinary work of a farming family. His father despaired of him and compared him unfavorably with his elder brother Liu Zhong, who worked hard and accumulated property. Liu Bang drank. He chased women. He ran up debts at the taverns of two local women, Old Lady Wang and Mother Wu, and when he passed out drunk in their establishments, they would sometimes see—so the story goes—a dragon hovering over him. Whether because of the dragon or because of the crowds that followed him, they found that on days when he drank there, they sold several times as much wine as usual. At the end of each year they tore up the tally sticks recording his debts.

These stories, too, were surely embellished. But they capture something real. Liu Bang was a natural leader of men without a natural place in society. He was not a scholar; he had little formal education and would later express open contempt for Confucian pedants, on one occasion snatching the ritual cap from a scholar's head and urinating in it. He was not a warrior aristocrat; he had no training in the arts of chariot warfare that had defined the old

nobility. He was not a hardworking farmer like his brother. He was what Chinese would call a youxia (遊俠) type or a local "hero," a man who lived by his wits and his charisma, gathered a following of drinking companions and hangers-on, and knew everyone worth knowing in the district.

Such men were both useful and dangerous to the state. The Qin government, which by the time Liu Bang reached adulthood had annexed his homeland, preferred to co-opt them. And so, at some point in his thirties, Liu Bang became a minor officer of the Qin state.

The Lowest Rung

His post was tingzhang (亭長), the head of a ting, which we may translate as "post" or "station." Specifically, he was the head of the Sishui post (泗水亭), named for the Si River that flowed nearby.

To understand what this meant, we must glance ahead at the structure of local government that the Qin had built and that the Han would inherit. The empire was divided into commanderies (jun, 郡), and the commanderies into counties (xian, 縣). Each county was governed by a magistrate appointed by the central government, assisted by a deputy and a commandant who handled security. Beneath the county level were rural districts (xiang, 鄉), and within the districts were hamlets (li, 里), the basic units in which households were registered.

The ting, the post, was a slightly different kind of unit. According to the Han shu, there was roughly one post for every ten li of road—the word li here meaning the unit of distance, not the hamlet—and roughly ten posts made up a district. The posts served as checkpoints, police stations, and rest houses along the roads. They provided lodging for officials traveling on government business, relayed documents, and above all kept the peace. The head of the post was responsible for catching thieves and bandits, arresting fugitives, and maintaining order in his stretch of countryside. Under him were a

handful of men: a "gate keeper" who managed the post's buildings and a "thief-catcher" who did the actual chasing.

The tingzhang was, in other words, a village constable. It was a salaried post, but a humble one, ranking at the very bottom of the official hierarchy. Its holders were local men chosen for their ability to keep order among their neighbors, which often meant men who were themselves a little rough around the edges. Liu Bang, with his network of drinking companions, his easy authority over young men, and his intimate knowledge of every tavern and hiding place in the district, was well suited to the job.

It is worth pausing on this. The man who would found the Han dynasty began his career as an employee of the Qin bureaucracy—at its lowest level, but within it nonetheless. He knew what it meant to receive orders from a county magistrate, to submit reports, to escort prisoners, to track down fugitives listed in official registers. He knew how the machine looked from the bottom. When he later sat on the throne and decided which parts of that machine to keep and which to discard, he decided as a man who had once been one of its smallest moving parts.

Sima Qian tells us that Liu Bang treated his superiors in the county office with mockery and contempt. He played practical jokes on the clerks and made fun of them openly. Yet he was protected by one of those clerks, a man who would become the most important partner of his life.

Xiao He

Xiao He (蕭何) was the zhuli yuan (主吏掾) of Pei county—the chief clerk responsible for personnel, the man who kept the records of the county's officials and handled their assignments and evaluations. He was, Sima Qian says, a man who "knew the statutes and was without equal in the documents" of the county administration. When Liu Bang got into trouble, as he frequently did, Xiao He protected him. When Liu Bang was sent to the capital on official business, the other clerks gave him three hundred cash each as a traveling gift; Xiao He gave him five hundred.

Why a careful, scrupulous clerk should have attached himself to an unreliable rogue is one of the small mysteries of history. Perhaps Xiao He saw in Liu Bang the qualities of leadership he lacked himself. Perhaps he simply liked him; Liu Bang was, by all accounts, extraordinarily likable. Perhaps, as a man who dealt with personnel every day, Xiao He recognized a rare kind of talent. Whatever the reason, the alliance between the constable and the clerk would become the foundation of an empire. Liu Bang would supply the charisma, the political instinct, and the willingness to gamble; Xiao He would supply the organization, the records, and the steady administrative hand.

Xiao He was not the only member of the county office who would rise with Liu Bang. Cao Shen (曹參), a prison officer in Pei, would become one of his most successful generals and later succeed Xiao He as Chancellor of the empire. Other companions came from humbler trades still. Fan Kuai (樊噲) was a dog butcher—dogs were raised for meat in that part of China—who would become one of Liu Bang's fiercest commanders and marry his sister-in-law. Xiahou Ying (夏侯嬰) was the stable master who drove carriages for the county post; he would become Liu Bang's personal charioteer and save the lives of his children. Zhou Bo (周勃) wove silkworm frames and played the flute at funerals; he would become a great general and, after Liu Bang's death, the man who saved the Liu family's throne. Lu Wan

(盧綰) had been born on the same day as Liu Bang in the same village; their fathers were friends; the two boys had studied together and grew up inseparable. He would become King of Yan and, in the end, flee to the Xiongnu as a fugitive.

These were the men of Pei and Feng, and their names fill the early chapters of Han history. Sima Qian would later devote separate biographies to most of them. Together they formed one of the most remarkable groups of founders in any dynasty: not aristocrats, not scholars, but clerks, jailers, butchers, drivers, and weavers. When they came to power, they would govern the empire with a practical, unpretentious realism born of their origins.

The Matchmaker's Eye

Around the time he served as constable, Liu Bang married. The story of the marriage, as Sima Qian tells it, is one of the most delightful in the Shiji.

A man named Lü (呂), known as Lü Gong, "Old Master Lü," came to Pei from the nearby county of Shanfu to escape some enemies. He was a friend of the county magistrate, and when he arrived, all the important men of the county came to pay their respects and bring gifts. Xiao He, as the chief clerk, was in charge of receiving the guests, and he announced that anyone whose gift was less than a thousand cash would have to sit outside, below the hall.

Liu Bang arrived. He did not have a single coin. But he handed in his visiting card with the inscription: "Congratulations—ten thousand cash."

The bluff was outrageous, and everyone knew it. Lü Gong, startled by the size of the gift, rose and went to the gate to greet the visitor in person. Lü Gong fancied himself a physiognomist, a reader of faces, and when he saw Liu Bang's face he was so impressed that he led him in and seated him in the place of honor. Xiao He, embarrassed for his friend, whispered that Liu Ji was a great talker who rarely

accomplished anything. Liu Bang ignored them all, took the seat of honor, and proceeded to make fun of the other guests.

When the drinking was over, Lü Gong held Liu Bang back with his eyes. He told him that he had read many faces in his life and had never seen one like his. "I have a daughter," he said, "whom I would like to give you as a wife, to sweep your floors and keep your house."

Lü Gong's wife was furious. She reminded her husband that he had always said their daughter was destined for greatness, that even the magistrate of Pei had asked for her hand and been refused. How could he give her to Liu Ji? Lü Gong replied that this was not something a woman could understand. And so the marriage was made.

The daughter's name was Lü Zhi (呂雉). She would become Empress Lü, and after her husband's death, the most powerful woman in Chinese history until Wu Zetian nearly a thousand years later. In the early years of the marriage, however, she was a farm wife. While Liu Bang was off at the post or in the taverns, she worked in the fields with their two children, a daughter (later known as Princess Yuan of Lu) and a son, Liu Ying, the future Emperor Hui.

Sima Qian adds another prophecy. One day an old man passing by asked Lü Zhi for something to drink. After drinking, he looked at her and said: "Madam, you will be the most honored person in the empire." He looked at her son and said, "The reason you will be honored is this boy." He looked at the daughter and said she, too, would be honored. When Liu Bang came home and heard the story, he ran after the old man and asked about himself. The old man told him that his wife and children owed their fortune to him, and that his own fortune was beyond words.

Once again, the prophecies are legend. But the marriage was real, and it brought Liu Bang an alliance with a family that would play an enormous role in the history of the Han. The Lü clan would provide generals, kings, and, eventually, the most dangerous succession crisis of the early dynasty.

"This Is How a Man Should Be"

At some point during his service as a minor official, Liu Bang was sent on government business to Xianyang, the Qin capital in the Wei River valley, far to the west. There he saw the First Emperor of Qin.

It is hard for us to imagine what that sight must have meant. Qin Shi Huangdi—the "First August Emperor of Qin"—had in 221 BCE completed the conquest of the six other kingdoms and unified the Chinese world for the first time. He had abolished the old feudal states and divided the entire empire into thirty-six commanderies (the number later grew), each under centrally appointed officials. He had standardized the script, the coinage, the weights and measures, and even the axle widths of carts. He had built roads radiating from the capital, connected the walls of the northern states into a single Great Wall, and burned the books of the schools of philosophy that challenged his rule. He traveled the empire in enormous processions, erecting stone inscriptions on sacred mountains proclaiming his virtue and his achievements. He was a man who had made himself something more than a king, and who sought, through alchemists and magicians, to make himself immortal.

Liu Bang watched the imperial procession pass. Sima Qian records his reaction in a single sigh:

> *"Ah! This is how a great man should be!"*

At about the same time, in the south, another young man watched the same emperor's procession pass along a river in the old state of Chu. His name was Xiang Yu (項羽), and he was the grandson of the last great general of Chu, killed by the Qin armies. Xiang Yu's reaction was different. "That man," he said, "could be replaced." His uncle hastily covered his mouth, warning him that such words could get the whole family exterminated.

Sima Qian surely placed these two stories side by side with intent. Xiang Yu, the aristocrat, saw the emperor as a usurper whose place he could take by force. Liu Bang, the commoner, saw him as a model of what a man could become. One saw an enemy; the other saw an aspiration. The contrast would define the war between them.

The Weight of Qin

Liu Bang's admiration for the First Emperor was not shared by most of his subjects. To understand why the Qin empire collapsed so quickly, and why the Han would work so hard to differentiate itself from its predecessor, we must understand what life under Qin rule was like for ordinary people in places like Pei.

The Qin state had been built on the doctrines of the thinkers later called Legalists (法家), above all Shang Yang, the fourth-century reformer who had transformed Qin into a war machine, and Han Fei, the brilliant theorist who had been forced to commit suicide in a Qin prison. Their central insight was that a state could be made strong by binding every subject to it through law, reward, and punishment. Households were registered and organized into groups of five and ten that were collectively responsible for one another's crimes. Every man was ranked in a hierarchy of honor based on military achievement. Agriculture and war were promoted; commerce and scholarship were discouraged. The law was written, public, and applied to everyone—and it was applied harshly.

Recent archaeological discoveries have given us a direct view of this system. In 1975, in a tomb at Shuihudi in Hubei province, archaeologists found more than a thousand bamboo slips buried with a minor Qin official named Xi, who had served as a clerk and legal officer in the region in the decades around the unification. The slips contained Qin statutes, legal questions and answers, model case reports, and administrative regulations. They revealed a legal system of astonishing precision. There were statutes on granaries, on stables, on the care of government oxen, on the measurement of grain, on the

punishment of officials who miscounted stores. There were rules on how a dead horse belonging to the government should be reported and its hide sold. Punishments ranged from fines—assessed in units of armor and shields—to forced labor, mutilation, and death.

The Qin system was not simply arbitrary terror. It was a rational, documented, bureaucratic order, and in many respects it was fair in the sense that it applied the same rules to everyone. But it demanded a great deal. After unification, the First Emperor mobilized labor on a scale never before seen. Hundreds of thousands of men were conscripted to build the Great Wall, the imperial highways, the palaces at Xianyang, and above all the emperor's tomb at Mount Li, the vast necropolis guarded by the Terracotta Army. Others were sent to garrison the northern frontier against the Xiongnu or to fight in the conquest of the far south. Men who failed to report for duty on time, or who fled from labor gangs, faced severe punishment. And because responsibility was collective, a single fugitive could bring ruin on his relatives and neighbors.

For a village constable like Liu Bang, this meant that much of his work consisted of enforcing the labor obligations of his neighbors—escorting conscripts, chasing down those who had fled, and reporting to the county office. It was work that put him in direct contact with the most resented aspects of the Qin regime. It would also, in time, provide the occasion for his rebellion.

The Death of the First Emperor

In 210 BCE, while on a tour of the eastern provinces, the First Emperor fell ill and died at Shaqiu, in what is today Hebei province. His death set in motion a chain of catastrophes.

The emperor's eldest son and designated heir, Fusu, was away on the northern frontier with the general Meng Tian. The emperor's companions on the tour—the chancellor Li Si, the eunuch Zhao Gao, and the emperor's younger son Huhai—kept his death secret. They

forged a letter in the emperor's name ordering Fusu and Meng Tian to commit suicide. Fusu obeyed. Huhai was enthroned as the Second Emperor. To disguise the smell of the corpse in the summer heat as the procession made its way back to the capital, they loaded carts of salted fish around the imperial carriage.

The Second Emperor was weak, and Zhao Gao was ruthless. Within two years, Zhao Gao had engineered the execution of Li Si and made himself the real power in the state. Meanwhile, the burdens on the population did not diminish. The building projects continued; the frontier garrisons had to be manned; the laws remained as harsh as ever. The structure that the First Emperor had held together by the force of his will began to crack.

It cracked first in the old lands of Chu, among men very much like Liu Bang.

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Book Eleven available March 26, 2027

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