

AP19: THE RISE OF HAN: LIU BANG, EMPRESS LÜ, AND EMPEROR WEN (4/89; 1/91; 1/95, 10/96)

A. Liu Bang Seizes the Ecumene

19a. *Why and with what methods was Liu Bang able to defeat Xiang Yu and the other rebels against Qin in the contest to recreate a Chinese universal state, and then how and why did he feel he had to defeat his own friends?*

It was really not until 196-5 BC that the post-Qin civil war ended and we can talk about there being a Han Dynasty in place, however unstably. Qin disintegrated and fell between 210 and 208. Between 208/7 and 196/5 a great civil war raged. Its participants recapitulated in the space of a decade the balance of power wars and intrigues of the last two centuries of the Warring States period. As though in a speeded up videotape, all the great powers arose again, though often with new leaders, but the one player who managed to move into the favored geographic position, the northwest quadrant of the central zone, proved once again to be the winner.

1. The First Rebels' Flaws

There was no shortage of contenders to fill the niche left vacant by Qin's disintegration. "They rose up like a flock of crows," the *Historical Records* says. With only one exception, however, the rebels proved to be flawed men, men confined by the limits of their own political imaginations to their home localities.

Chen She, for example, the first conspicuous rebel, came from the southeast, the old territory of Eastern Chu. He was soon joined by a nearby rebel, Wu Guang. Both rebelled because they had committed political crimes. They had been late in bringing corvée laborers to a location where this tax in labor was to be performed. The Qin penalty for that was death. Reasoning that they might as well risk execution for the sheep instead of the lamb, they rose in rebellion. They could not, however, imagine going for the whole flock by heading for the decisive region—the northwest.

They kept their rebellions local and parochial. They even made deals with each other

to respect each others' local territories. None made or could imagine making a persuasive claim to rule All Under Heaven. Just as they had entered the ruling class as local officials, they remained local rebels.

Chen She and Wu Guang signed such a turf-respecting agreement. Chen supposedly decided to impersonate the dead Prince Fusu, but he made no move to head toward Xi'an to take up the throne. Similar impostures often appear during popular but inchoate rebellions. Russian rebellions of the early modern period were rife with them. Since people were nostalgic for the dead prince, Chen might hope to borrow some legitimacy by the pretense. Who could call him out on it? Neither photography nor fingerprints were available in those days. In an age long before television, only a handful would ever have laid eyes on the prince, perhaps no one in Eastern Chu.

Similarly, Wu Guang was ready to claim he was Xiang Yan, the great Chu general who had been defeated and killed during the last stages of the wars of unification.

Hence these two rebellions were penny ante operations. Their two leaders lacked the breadth of imagination to grasp for rule over All Under Heaven. They were content to be local or regional rulers, masters of some portion of a restored Warring States kingdom.

But after all, wasn't that to be expected from such low-ranking meritocrats as Chen and Wu? Neither of them would have been in the ruling class but for having been recruited into the lowest district and township levels of the new meritocracy which Qin had created for each of the regions it had just conquered. These two thought small because that fit the template of merit they had been selected to conform to.

They suffered accordingly.

2. The Limitations of Xiang Liang, Xiang Yu

It should not be surprising that both Chen and Wu were soon overwhelmed by one of the great aristocrats who rose up in the south, Xiang Yu, and his uncle Xiang Liang, the son of the martyred Xiang Yan.

The Xiangs were great military aristocrats from the defunct Chu state. They had all of the virtues and strengths of a Warring States military aristocratic clan, but also all of their limitations. They could not imagine themselves being anything but men of and in Chu, because that was where their aristocratic base was located. Despite their higher status, that in principle doomed them to the same level of nullity as Chen and Wu.

Xiang Yu 項羽 (233-202 BC) who soon indirectly but violently disposed of Xiang Liang, could not think of anything else to do

but make himself hereditary chief minister of Chu and to find one of the heirs to the Chu royal house, who was living as a shepherd in the wilderness, drag the poor refugee away from his sheep and crown him as King of Chu (and Xiang's puppet).

Xiang Yu possessed considerable tactical military skill and was courageous almost to the point of insanity. The stories told about his love of killing come close to describing a sociopathic personality. He was, however, clever enough to charge up the vertical axis into the north, and there decisively defeat the revived forces of Zhao. A mixed group of Zhao soldiers and statesmen had recently revived Zhao just as Xiang was reviving Chu. After defeating Zhao, Xiang marched back down to the horizontal axis, and stormed west along it to take Xi'an, the old Qin capital. Obviously, Xiang understood the winning strategy of Warring States times. Having taken over the old center of power, however, he was in the end outmaneuvered by a competitor capable of thinking bigger than him, Liu Bang.

Xiang suffered from all of the limitations of an aristocrat on the personal side. He was arrogant. He could not believe that anybody who was not from an equally high station in life could beat him. That worked well enough while he was bullying and then defeating Chen She and then Wu Guang, and even the rulers of Zhao. It did not work when he came up against somebody really clever like Liu Bang, even though Liu was just as lower class in his origins as Chen and Wu.

Worst of all, Xiang was inattentive to detail. He was never exactly where he should be when he ought to have been there. He assumed that, almost by divine right, he was going to have supreme power handed to him. He didn't take seriously the fact that while he was shooting up north to take over Zhao, Liu Bang had slipped across his wake to beat him through the passes guarding the old Qin territories in the west. That did not bother Xiang because he thought Liu could be no more than his own servant, preparing the way for him.

Xiang eventually marched up to the walls of Xianyang (the name then of the capital, which was actually a few miles northwest of modern Xi'an) with his 400,000 men. When he discovered that Liu Bang's army of 100,000 was occupying the Qin capital,¹ he marched up and assumed that Liu would get out of his way. He vaguely thought of killing Liu, but didn't bother chasing very far after him when Liu snuck out of a victory dinner

¹ The numbers, from "The Annals of Xiang Yu" in Sima Qian's *Historical Records*, are shaky, and probably exaggerated, but are the only ones we have and likely at least reflect the proportions of the opposing forces.

which was supposed to end with his execution.

In fact the highly prudent Liu Bang promptly got out of his way. Xiang took over the capital, looted and raped and murdered his way through it, leaving Xianyang a smoking ruin, then moved out into the suburbs where he broke into and looted First Emperor's tomb (which is why we are fairly sure the archaeologists won't find much intact when they finally open it). Xiang Yu's looters missed the outlying parts of the tomb complex. Hence the now famous buried regiments of highly realistic terra cotta warriors (art historians not previously suspecting the presence of realism of a Greco-Roman sort in ancient Chinese sculpture) were accidentally found more or less intact during the 1970s some distance away from the mound over the tomb.

Having finished his looting, Xiang and his army turned back to the east and returned to Chu for the winter, leaving empty what we and any good contemporary strategist could have told him was the key territory for conquering All Under Heaven. Before leaving Xianyang, he had named Liu Bang Prince of Han, a principality just south and east of the old Qin territory, but just north of the Qinling Mountains, and so within easy commuting distance of Xianyang.

Xiang Yu felt that a commoner like Liu Bang would not dare to disobey an aristocrat to move in on Xianyang again, but of course that is just what Liu did once Xiang was back in Chu, and in the course of the next several years Liu, though he lost many battles, completely outmaneuvered Xiang, and finally drove him to ground in Eastern Chu.

In a great romantic scene first limned by Sima Qian and eventually dramatized as the libretto of the early modern Peking opera, *Bawang bie ji*, "The Hegemon King Bids Farewell to His Favorite," Xiang Yu said good-bye to his favorite concubine, got on his favorite horse, and rode off to a glorious death in battle after making a final speech. (Sima Qian, like Thucydides, put apt speeches in the mouths of his subjects.) Sima Qian has him say "It was Heaven which destroyed me. It was no fault of mine in the use of arms." Nevertheless Sima Qian ends the "Basic Annals of Xiang Yu" with the words "Was he not indeed deluded in saying this?"

The moral of the story of the civil war as Sima Qian tells it is that basically Liu Bang's opponents were small men (in the Confucian moral-intellectual sense), even the aristocrats amongst them. Only one of them could think bigger than running one of the Warring States kingdoms. Only Liu Bang understood that what Qin had done had irreversibly changed the balance of political power. All Under Heaven, having once been unified, was des-

tinued to be united again.

It is at such points as this that we must abandon the notion of history as a "social science." In class origins, Liu Bang was identical to Chen and Wu. As tactician he was far inferior to Xiang Yu. Yet he survived and ruled.

3. The Versatility of Liu Bang

a. Beginnings

Liu Bang 劉邦 was a man capable of rising above the accidents of his social and geographic origins. Not only was there not a dime's worth of difference in social origins between Liu Bang and Chen She, his home area of Pei county, in the southwest corner of the Shantung peninsula, was just as geographically peripheral as Chen's homeland in Eastern Chu.

Liu's rebellion began under much the same sort of circumstances as Chen's. Several prisoners from a group he was escorting ran away, which made him guilty of a capital crime. He released the rest, but they insisted on staying with him and urged him to launch a might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb rebellion. So it wasn't a difference in circumstances or in social or geographic origins that gave impetus to Liu Bang's eventual triumph. It was just that for some reason Liu thought big and clearly from the beginning.

Sima Qian reports in the "Basic Annals of Emperor Gaozu," (高祖, meaning High Ancestor, being the posthumous temple name of Liu Bang) that signs and portents arrayed themselves around Liu Bang from his very birth. He even had long earlobes, one of the stigmata of sageliness. (So, by the way, did Lyndon Johnson, which suggests this is not an infallible sign.)

Though of relatively low class origins, he became village headman, and then undersheriff of his township. In office he was not pretentious. He was happy to sit around drinking with his peers. The historian reports the testimony of a tavern-keeper that one day the tavern-keeper saw Liu Bang snoozing in a drunken stupor in his tavern. Above him the air suddenly began to shimmer, and a dragon took form above the sleeping emperor-to-be. (Of course we don't know how much of his own stock the tavern keeper had sampled that day.)

Yet there must be a core of at least poetic truth to even the most unlikely of these stories. Some people *are* different. Liu could always think big. Long before he rose above his native township he won the love of the daughter of a rich local merchant, surnamed Lü, and bluffed the old man into acquiescing in the marriage. (Miss Lü herself was prepared to elope with Liu, even though he was

a pauper, so he must have had some sex appeal too.) Liu was ambitious from the beginning. When he saw First Emperor on one of his tours, he said he would someday be like that.

b. His rise to power

When he rebelled, he told the prisoners he was escorting that he would turn them loose in any event, but if they wanted to join him perhaps that would lead to something big. Most of them joined him. There were many such incidents thereafter. Liu would propose doing something risky, and would give his associates the option of going off on their own, but he also welcomed volunteers joining him. Invariably most joined him. These are clear signs of both charisma and shrewd leadership.

Some of those early volunteers became his key advisers as emperor. Those who stayed with him to the end were mostly on the civilian side. Those who joined a bit later and became his best generals were ultimately purged by him. A few civilian advisers like Xiao He and Cao Can and several others not only became Liu's most loyal courtiers, but survived to become the semi-loyal courtiers of his widow, and at least a handful survived long enough to set things up so that his fourth son, Liu Heng (Emperor Wen posthumously) could finally come to the throne in 180 BC.

Though Liu had the boldness of a true founding Son of Heaven, he was also prudent. For example, he strove to avoid direct confrontations with opponents stronger than himself. He tried to wait until they had slipped a bit, and only hit them when they were on their way down anyway. That may not have been very chivalrous or brave, but was a much more reliable way to increase the odds of winning battles.

For example, though born and bred in Pei in the Si River valley, in the old complex of little states that Qi and Chu had fought over during Warring States times, he knew that there was no strategic future there for one who aimed at ruling All Under Heaven. So once he had rebelled he kept fighting his way west. Whether he won or lost a particular battle, he seemed to always sidle at least a bit further to the west. While Xiang Yu was booming north to fight Zhao, leapfrogging over the westward path Liu Bang was taking, Liu did not allow himself to be distracted by either fear or short run opportunities in the east or center.

That's why Liu beat out Xiang Yu in getting inside the passes and taking over the Qin capital. Through his magnanimity toward men whom he could have easily destroyed, Liu quickly earned the gratitude not just of the Qin courtiers who didn't know what to do next after getting rid of Zhao Gao, but also of

the common people of the capital region. No wonder they all gave their loyalty to this shrewd easterner who had suddenly appeared in their midst promising not to kill anybody or do any looting, and who indeed restored good order to the capital until Xiang Yu finally came booming up after him. He must have seemed to them a Confucian sage incarnate, and Xiang Yu the bad last king of a morally defunct old order.

Liu hurried to Xiang's camp, took a humble posture, assuring Xiang he had arrived early only to play the good servant making arrangements for Xiang's coming. He hinted he would be grateful for receipt of any little fief Xiang might care to grant him, and then fled ignominiously from the victory banquet. That act of abject cowardice kept Xiang from taking him seriously, as did his alacrity in accepting the offer of Han as his fief. By playing the Uriah Heap-like man of merit, promptly evacuating Xianyang and decamping to Han, Liu utterly disarmed any lingering suspicions Xiang might have been harboring.

Xiang only disgraced himself in the eyes of the courtiers and commoners of the capital by his subsequent looting and raping. Once Xiang was safely back home in Chu, Liu returned from Han, thereby earning a second time the gratitude of the Xianyangers, who remembered how much more decently he had behaved when he first took the city. They all rallied to his side, giving him a stable new home base for his decade-long series of campaigns to the east and south.

From 206 to 201 BC Liu reassembled the horizontal set of states and territories that Qin had put together over the course of the late 4th and the first two-thirds of the 3rd century BC. This cut across and undid all of Xiang Yang's earlier vertical axis conquests. Liu then rewarded his own generals with the territories they captured. Despite losing as many battles as he won, within half a decade, he had control of all of the north. He then cut down into the southeast, defeating Xiang Yu and killing him on the last battlefield in Eastern Chu.

The history of the last century of the Warring States period had repeated itself. However, the next phase of the history of the reconstituted universal state did not repeat that of its Qin predecessor.

4. Destruction of Liu's Generals (Han Xin, Peng Yue, Wu Rui, Qing Bu, Zang Du & Zhang Ao)

Now, however, Liu had all the above-named able generals scattered all over north China occupying what should have been his

core territory, hardly a recipe for stability, particularly since these men considered themselves Liu Bang's peers. During the last half-decade of his life, 201-196 BC, Liu's strategy was to pick quarrels, one at a time, with each of these generals in turn. That allowed him to knock them off in isolation from each other. All but one or two of them were gone by the time he began to physically weaken during the last year of his life. (For the details see the material translated by Burton Watson in the first volume of his excerpts from Sima Qian.)

Judging from Sima Qian's account, it looks as though Liu's heart began to weaken toward the middle of the 190s. There was no shortage of potential successors. There may have been too many to render a stable succession likely. Liu had several brothers and a number of sons from the several wives he had added to his harem between campaigns. His primary wife, however, was still the lady who knew him from back when, Lady Lü, whose father was a rich merchant in Pei Commandery, Liu's old home town.

The former Miss Lü was even tougher than when she had insisted on the match and threatened to elope with young Liu, having even endured captivity for a time at the hands of one of her husband's enemies, and humiliation when Liu delayed paying the price for her liberation. Chinese women were still quite autonomous then. They were still a thousand years away from becoming submissive in what we think of as the characteristic Chinese manner. There are a number of instances of independent-minded middle class girls eloping with their lovers later on in the Han Dynasty, including the lady who became the wife of the poet Sima Xiangru late in the 2nd century BC.

At this point, Lady Lü was in a position to become the dominant figure at the new and still raw Han court once it lost its founding figure.

B. Han's Crisis of the First Succession

19b. How did Empress Lü and then Emperor Wen finesse the crisis of the first succession? How justified is the soft Confucian celebration of Emperor Wen's reign as a second golden age, comparable to the times of King Wen of Zhou?

1. Empress Lü's Regency

Liu Bang died in 196 BC, not long after going back to his old home town for a last celebration. The last of the rival generals had just been defeated and every one of them had

either been killed or driven off across the northern borders. Since he left behind a number of sons and in-laws of dubious loyalty, he needed this tough old lady to do his will posthumously. She, at least, proved loyal to him. Liu carefully instructed her as to which of his ministers to trust for which jobs. Finally, she asked him what to do when the last of these men had died. Hard-boiled realist to the end, he assured her she needn't worry about that. By that time she would be dead too. And so it proved.

Dowager Empress Lü put one of her own sons on the throne as Emperor Hui. There was a modicum of stability at first, since to replace the purged generals outside of his family Liu Bang had placed his own brothers and sons in the fiefs established earlier for the generals. Sima Qian calls these territories *sufeng* 素封, usually translated as "pseudo-fiefs."

These nominally feudal kingdoms/principalities were designed to make sure that people loyal to the throne were occupying particularly important territories. Their feudal outward form of organization was designed to appease the Confucian meritocrats' sensibilities. All the rest of Han's extensive territory was still organized into *jun* and *xian* as Qin had done. The ruthlessly centralizing Qin administrative code had also been declared still temporarily operative by Liu Bang, and his widow continued it in force by default.

Empress Lü's regency came perhaps a bit prematurely, but not so much so that the stabilizing of the new regime begun by Liu Bang was aborted.

The key members of her own Lü family—her brothers and nephews—with their mercantile background, had been trying to turn themselves into what under my taxonomy would be labeled an aristocratized plutocracy. They were initially important because of daddy's money, but had become still more important because brother-in-law had become the Tian Zi. They had been doing well enough under brother-in-law's reign, as useful, nominally aristocratic counterfoils to the Confucian meritocrats (since the old aristocracy had mostly died off or been declassified in the course of the post-Qin civil war), but now that Liu Bang was dead their insecurity encouraged them to drift toward usurpation.

However, Lady Lü, ruling "from behind the screen," for her teen-aged son, was too loyal a widow-lady to allow her brothers and nephews to interfere with the prerogatives of the family she had married into, the Lius. Liu Bang's surviving old courtiers, who had risen with him from his days as undersheriff back in Pei, joined together with the old lady to purge her brothers and nephews.

Unfortunately she was not particularly enamored of the other sons of her husband,

including those born from secondary wives. This would not have been unexpected for a wife in those pre-purdah times. She even killed off her own children, at least most of them, when she had to turn to a child born to her son by a lesser denizen of the harem so as to preserve her own power as dowager empress when her eldest son died in 187. To keep this step-child on the throne she had to purge all the adult sons of Liu Bang, and did so most bloodily, except for Liu Bang's fourth son, Liu Heng, even though he was born of a secondary wife.

2. Liu Heng (Emperor Wen) and the Shen Zi

Liu Heng 劉恆 had been given the pseudo-fief of Dai well up into the northeast, between Qi and Yan. That was just far enough away and in a politically uninteresting enough direction to not draw too much of step-mama's fatal attention to him.

Liu Heng also had the good sense to pretend to possession of a room temperature IQ. And so step-mama decided it was not worth knocking off such a dummy.

Step-mama ruled continuously from behind the screen from 195 to 180 when nature took its course and she finally passed from the scene, leaving Liu Heng as the most eligible survivor within the ranks of the princes a generation younger than his father.

Liu Bang's surviving handful of advisers had kept an eye on Liu Heng all along. Even at the lower levels, everyone in the meritocracy was ready to back the sort of conservative coup that would bring somebody with the family name Liu to the throne. Such a move would put them one-up on the proto-aristocratized plutocrats of the Lü clan. Also helping establish Liu Heng's plausibility as heir was a rumor that Emperor Hui's nominal successor was actually some other fellow's son being foisted off as a Liu by the Empress, who wanted another kid for whom she could act as regent and so preserve her own power. In any event, once the Empress was dead, the path to power seemed to be open to Liu Heng.

Everyone (except the Lües) feared that should another dynasty be established so soon, it might turn out that a new dynasty would be needed every generation. Would each such change require a hideously dangerous and expensive civil war? The great men at court and the lesser men of merit decided this was neither prudent nor necessary. No man's job at court nor even his life would be safe with such frequent turnovers. They knew what had happened during the post-Qin civil war decade.

And so the surviving courtiers of Liu

Bang conspired with their opposite numbers at the regional court of Liu Heng. They got rid of all those people who objected to a Liu restoration without Liu Heng having to ask them to do it. Just as his passivity saved him from Empress Lü, it now got him invited to take the throne without sticking his neck out. By the time he had completed the long journey from Dai to Xi'an, running catty-corner from one corner to the other of the northern part of the central zone, all the dirty work had been done without his having to lift a finger. The little emperor was removed, and so were all the Lües.

Arriving in Xi'an, he saw the loyal but aging courtiers of his father with blood on their hands and exhausted by the tensions of the preceding decade and a half. He comforted them, told them it was time for them to rest, and pensioned them off, thereby making room for his own people who had served him in Dai.

One could reasonably conclude that without doing anything himself, just about everything which Liu Heng would have wanted done had in fact been done. In the last couple of chapters of his biography of Shen Buhai, Herrlee Creel surmises that Liu Heng had in fact been reading the *Shen Zi*. Creel also observes that one of Liu Heng's chief tutors had the contemporary reputation of being one of the chief scholars of the *Shen Zi* of that generation.

Adding two and two to make six and a half, as is usual when doing ancient history, Creel concludes that it was no coincidence that Liu Heng had been behaving just as the *Shen Zi* would have advised him to behave. Of course the fact that the new emperor never claimed to be a disciple of Shen Buhai would also have been one of the things the *Shen Zi* would have advised him to do. To admit having read that book would have alerted people to the fact that Liu must not have been as dumb as he was trying to appear, and they would have been more ready to counter the *wuwei*, *wubuwei* ploy he had been pulling for so many years.²

The new emperor's inauguration of what later Confucians would categorize as a "golden age" might be taken as further proof of the influence of the *Shen Zi*. In actual fact that golden age looks almost as Daoist as it does Confucian, and to add to its eclectic aura, the constitutional structure it rested on remained unchanged from the one inherited from Qin.

Even the coinage remained the old Qin Half-ouncer, though much thinned out and

lightened by private coiners. And yet Liu Heng was ultimately canonized in the imperial ancestral temple as Emperor Wen (Wendi 文帝), a label which overtly drew an analogy between his reign and that of the sagely King Wen of Zhou. He had taken to heart Shen Buhai's advice to always pretend to be a Confucian. Was he also actually a Confucian? If so, was he only a Confucian?

3. Emperor Wen's "Golden Age"

a. Domestic affairs

Any time a minister proposed spending something, the new emperor tended to object. He said he preferred to keep the old palaces and their appurtenances. Informed the land tax was only one-fifteenth of the produce in kind, he urged making it lower still, reducing it to one-thirtieth of the total produce.

The soft Confucians amongst his advisers provided what we would call "supply side" arguments for such tax cuts. But unlike Ronald Reagan, Emperor Wen did not run deficits as a result. He cut expenditures by more than enough to cover the resulting short-term declines in revenue and when the resulting growth in the economy increased receipts anyway, he piled up surpluses of cash in the treasury so consistently that we are told so little need was there to every draw on the reserves that the strings linking the hundreds and thousands of cash rotted away in the treasury, and it proved impossible even to conveniently count the surplus.

In domestic life we find not just frugality and the absence of cruelty at the personal level at court, but also that the ministers seemed to wind up doing whatever dirty work remained, seeming to leave nothing for the emperor to do but slouch amiably around the palace in a dirty robe, smiling benevolently at everyone.

Not only were taxes low and lowered further, but the emperor tolerated all sorts of autonomy within the pseudo-fiefs run by his brothers and cousins and nephews. If there were great merchants who took refuge in these pseudo-fiefs, they could earn a good living for themselves and for their patrons by literally making money for them—coining debased Half-ouncers—thereby becoming local and regional plutocrats.

As a consequence of this early version of free coinage the twelve-grain Half-ouncer shrank to eight-grains, and then six-grains, four-grains, and even two-grains, becoming so thin a "Half-ouncer" that the square hole grew ever larger and the coin ever thinner so that the four slivers of bronze left around the hole would often break apart into four frail leaves of bronze that looked like elm-pods.

² On the basis of the scholarship beginning to appear on the Reagan administration, I am tempted to offer the parallel argument that President Reagan had either read Creel's *Shen Pu-Hai* or had independently rediscovered its principles.

Even these elm-pod coins were tolerated in circulation by the emperor, who was prepared to allow people to make and get whatever kinds of coins they wanted. In monetary terms it was truly a regime of *wuwei*, *wubuwei*, *laissez faire*, *laissez passer*.

Strangely, the resulting inflation was modest. The old Half-ouncers, being made of bronze rather than the unavailable gold or silver, were never very valuable even at full weight. Even a debasement of six-fold did not raise prices very much since the supply-side induced boom quickly raised effective transaction demand for coins by almost that amount.

Society recovered and even prospered. The reduction in state expenditures freed up more real resources for society to expend for its own purposes. And of course a post-war boom was overdue. After the world wars of the 230s, the great upsets of the teens when First Emperor was trying to impose uniformity on everyone, the hideous civil war of the last decade of the 3rd century, the uncertainties accompanying the peace after the death of Liu Bang and during the regency of his widow made the regions continue to feel uncertain. Now they could relax and get rich.

Instead of making an analogy between Emperor Wen and Reagan, perhaps one to Harding and Coolidge or even to Grant would be more apt. In all these post-war or post-civil war situations, seemingly nothing was being done by the rulers, but most people were becoming reasonably prosperous either anyway or precisely because nothing much was being done by the rulers.

c. Foreign policy

Results in foreign policy were strikingly similar. The Xiongnu have not been intruding into the narrative for the preceding couple of chapters because they were not intruding much into China during the years of the world wars and civil wars. It just so happens that by a lucky chance (or not really by chance, if Thomas Barfield's analysis is correct) the Xiongnu turned inactive soon after the middle of the 3rd century BC, and remained so through the next generation. Without any actions by Chinese diplomats and/or soldiers, who were otherwise engaged, a succession quarrel broke out amongst the candidates for the Xiongnu chieftainship, and they kept fighting each other from c. 215 until c. 180, and so had no leisure for raiding China.

Perhaps, Thomas Barfield surmises, this internecine struggle was inadvertently tripped off by the unavailability of loot from a China too incoherent to be easily raided to obtain loot. The Xiongnu rulers had mostly supported themselves with such loot. Once it became unavailable, the Xiongnu pastoral-nomad economy proved insufficiently

rich to provide equal amounts of wealth from domestic taxes, and eventually the members of the ruling class turned on each other to try to keep up their incomes.

Luckily for the Chinese, the Xiongnu were as distracted as they were during those years. However, just as Emperor Wen was coming to the throne, the Xiongnu also got their act together again, and led by strong chieftains (called by the title *shanyu*, or *chanyu*), they began to raid the frontiers once more. Perhaps this restoration of unity was fueled by the anticipation of renewed loot from a China once again sufficiently peaceful and prosperous to be worth raiding on a regular basis.

What to do about this? Emperor Wen acted characteristically. He blocked or passively encouraged his courtiers to block all those ambitious hard Legalist and hard Confucian courtiers who were interested in launching military moves against the Xiongnu. Instead, the emperor went along with proposals to send the barbarians presents, "gifts," even when the Xiongnu did not send much or any "tribute" first.

In other words, he would send them bribes disguised as gifts. These would even include Chinese princesses. That was one commodity in surplus at any respectable polygamous Chinese court. There was no shortage of imperial wives, and at least half the output of these imperial consorts was of princesses rather than princes. The former were no good at all unless shipped off to tame barbarians at or beyond the frontiers.

This policy of appeasement turned out to be cheaper than fighting these pastoral-nomads, at least over the short run. Over the longer run, perhaps by the very next reign, or at least by the time of Emperor Wu after 140 BC, the very prosperity Emperor Wen's *wuwei*, *wubuwei* domestic policies caused may have evoked more frequent and intense Xiongnu raids and required abandonment of the *wuwei* policies in general, for domestic as well as foreign policy.

c. Emperor Wen's heritage for China

The Emperor died in 156 BC and was immediately posthumously given the appellation Wendi, Emperor Wen, using the same posthumous name, 文, applied to King Wen of Zhou, because his was believed by soft Confucians at the time to have been a new golden age. This new exemplar of soft Confucianism showed, the soft Confucians argued, how a passive, soft Confucian monarch could encourage his subjects to create prosperity and a moral social order precisely because he himself did or coveted nothing. It also showed how he could win peace abroad by doing nothing to stimulate avarice amongst potential enemies abroad. Let this be

an example for all his successors, concluded the soft Confucians.

And yet a fair number of fairly nasty things had to be done by his ministers in order for the emperor to have done nothing. These acts included engaging in some vicious factional quarrels at court. It was just that the emperor had managed to keep himself clear of the blame for these acts.

Nor was this exemplary Confucian monarch free of the taint of Daoism. Ceremonials of a vaguely Daoist sort were performed by Emperor Wen himself, the first time this had been done since Qin times, and nothing was ever done to fundamentally change the Qin administrative arrangements or to revoke the Qin administrative law code.

Does this allow us to still call him a soft Confucian? Or was he sometimes also a soft Legalist disciple of Shen Buhai with some Daoist and hard Confucian leanings? Or was he a soft Confucian in power who had to do or arrange to have done things he might have preferred not to do? Were some of these things all that nasty? Was the Qin administrative structure so Legalist as Confucians then and since have argued? Or was it the only sort of structure within which even a soft Confucian meritocracy could flourish?

I do not profess to know the answers to all of these questions, but I really don't care that much, because though it is clear that the emperor acted as Shen Buhai would have had him act, he also acted as Mencius would have advised him to act, and Shen probably would not have disapproved of that: How much bad can we say about a ruler who cut both taxes and expenditures; and who did not attempt to either win or expand All Under Heaven by military acts. If he had to pay out some bribes to the barbarians, he could so on the cheap, at least in his own time. His more overtly interventionist successors never did as well.

Suggested Further Reading

- Ssu-ma, Ch'ien. *Records of the Grand Historian of China* (Tr. Burton Watson), Vol. I. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.
- Pan, Ku. *The History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Tr. Homer H. Dubs). Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1938-55.
- Wang, Yü-ch'üan. "An Outline of the Central Government of the Former Han Dynasty," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, XII (1949), 132-187.
- Barfield, Thomas J. "The Hsiung-nu Imperial Confederacy: Organization and Foreign Policy," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XLI, 1 (1981), 45-62. Barfield has since published an excellent book dealing with pastoralism in many other places as well and written from both the anthropological

and historical perspectives.

Chen Kaige. *Farewell My Concubine* (VHS Video, 1993). Imaginatively links the Beijing Opera, *Bawang bie ji* (*The Hegemon King Bids Farewell to His Concubine*) to China's 20th century revolutionary turmoil.

Lévi, Jean. *The Dream of Confucius* (tr. Barbara Bray). NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992/Fr.ed.1989. The dreadful sequel to Lévi's excellent *Emperor of China*. I mention this fictionalization of the rise of Liu Ban only to warn you off it (unless you favor the Fu Manchu, secret society style of dealing with Chinese life).