

KINGS AND COMMONERS

LIU BANG AND THE FOUNDING OF THE HAN DYNASTY

If a woman dreams about a god and if her husband sees a dragon hovering over her body, you can bet that their son will be something special. If that boy later risks his own safety to kill a poisonous snake, there's no doubt left: this kid is marked for greatness.

That was the case with a man named Liu Bang. Liu needed all the supernatural help that he could get, because when he grew up he did something nobody had ever done before, something that horrified many people—although he was only a peasant, he became the emperor of China.

In 256 BCE, when Liu was born, the Chinese people were watching the Qin family become a powerful dynasty. The king of Qin conquered the other rulers in neighboring states and became Shi Huangdi, First Emperor. He left a note to be read after his death that said he wanted his son Fusu to be the next ruler. A courtier named Zhao Gao, however, preferred a weak ruler whom he could manipulate into doing what he wanted. He destroyed the late emperor's note

and forged another one that ordered Fusu to commit suicide. Zhao Gao then said that Shi Huangdi actually had wanted Huhai, another of his sons, to be the next ruler. Huhai, who was in on the plot, stepped up to the throne.



The movie Farewell My Concubine tells the story of modern actors portraying the story of the valiant general Xiang Yu (on the left) and his heroic death.

Huhai wasn't too bright, and Zhao Gao wanted to show people that he could control the new emperor. He brought a deer to court and had everyone swear it was a horse. Huhai was bewildered. It just didn't look like a horse to him. But everyone else said that it was, so he figured he must have gone crazy and he agreed that it was a horse. This lack of self-confidence convinced Zhao Gao and the onlookers that Huhai was someone he could control easily.

Some people weren't happy with the Qin's firm grip on the country. They disliked the harsh laws, the high taxes, and the emperor's frequent demands that people leave their daily lives to build roads, walls, and palaces. Huhai's hold on the throne was starting to grow shaky, and if a few strong men came forward, he would have trouble holding on to it.

That's exactly what happened only a few years after Huhai became the second emperor. Several men plotted to get rid of him and his followers. Two of the most important rebels were Xiang Yu, the head of an old military family who led a group of dissatisfied aristocrats, and Chen She, a leader of peasants and workers.

Meanwhile, Liu Bang was living a comfortable and successful life in Pei, in eastern China. He had such a favorable appearance that a man who claimed to be able to read people's characters from their faces allowed him to marry his daughter, despite his wife's objections. Liu became a leader of a *ting*. Things were looking good for this peasant.

Then disaster struck. One of Liu's jobs as *ting* leader was to escort groups of convicts to workplaces in need of labor. On the way to work at the site of the emperor's tomb, some of the convicts ran away. Now Liu was in big trouble. He knew that if he stopped to look for them, he would be beheaded for arriving late. On the other hand, if he appeared at the emperor's tomb site without all the workers, he would be executed for letting them escape.

Liu saw only one solution. He too ran away. He hid out in the bush and became a bandit, in charge of a group of men who did not support the emperor. Others joined him, attracted by his reputation as a kind and good leader. The first-century CE *History of the Han* says that Liu Bang "did

停

A *ting* is a group of small villages.

66 Ban Gu, *History of the Han*,
first century CE

not cultivate literary pursuits, but was by nature bright and understanding. He was adept at planning and could listen to others. From troops guarding the gates and garrison soldiers on up, he greeted them like old friends.” A man like this was bound to have loyal followers.

Meanwhile, things were falling apart all over China. Chen She, the leader of the rebellious peasants, declared he was the King of Zhang-Chu. (Actually, there wasn't really any such state. Its territory was probably whatever land his army could occupy at any given time.) He looked like a real threat to the emperor until his charioteer killed him in 208 BCE.

People in Liu's home province of Pei rose up against the Qin rulers. They needed a leader. Who better than Liu Bang, whom everybody liked and who already had thousands of followers? They asked Liu to lead them, and he accepted. Xiang Yu, who led the disgruntled aristocrats, wasn't going to sit by and let these commoners take over the empire, so he decided to do it himself.



Wealthy people could afford not only proud horses to pull their carriages through town, but also expensive bronze models of their vehicles and horses to use in the world of the dead.

The two men became fierce rivals: Xiang Yu, an aristocrat with tradition behind him and powerful allies supporting him, and Liu Bang—a peasant, but one whose mother had dreamed of a god and whose father had seen a dragon, a man who as a boy had saved many people's lives with his bravery, a man whose face was so pleasing that a man would risk his wife's displeasure to have his daughter marry him—and a man with a loyal band of followers who disapproved of the emperor.

The conflict turned into a contest to see who could reach the capital and its great treasures first. The area around the Qin capital would be a special prize because of its riches and historical importance. After its ownership was determined, the rivals would decide who would govern which part of the empire.

Liu entered the region in 207 BCE, before Xiang Yu. He didn't allow any looting or destruction in the capital. According to the *Record of the Historian*, he said to the city's powerful men, "I have come only to save you from injury, not to exploit or oppress you. Therefore do not be afraid!"

He established a new law code. Instead of the complex system established by the Qin, Liu reduced the law to a simple statement: "Those who murder will be killed; those who injure or steal will be punished according to their offenses." Period.

Xiang Yu was far away in the east when Liu made his triumphant entry into the capital. He didn't learn for another year that Liu had beaten him to the Qin region. He was furious and decided to get rid of his rival. Liu had only 100,000 soldiers whereas Xiang had 400,000, so Liu surrendered and turned the capital over to Xiang Yu.

According to the *History of the Han*, Xiang wanted to kill Liu Bang, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. One of his advisers told a warrior named Xiang Zhuang, "Go in and do a sword dance and use this as a pretext to strike and kill the Lord of Pei. Otherwise, all of you are going to become his slaves."

Xiang Zhuang asked Liu Bang for permission to perform a sword dance for him. One of Liu's followers was suspicious about this, so he "also rose and danced, always using his body to shield the Lord of Pei." Once the dance was over, Liu Bang excused himself, saying he had to go to the

“” Sima Qian, “Basic Annals,”
Record of the Historian, about
100 BCE

“” Sima Qian, “Basic Annals,”
Record of the Historian, about
100 BCE

66 Ban Gu, *History of the Han*, first century CE

SO WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Recently, archaeologists have found portions of both the Qin and Han legal codes. Comparison of them showed that they were actually quite similar. The basic structure of the government remained the same, and many Qin laws stayed in force. Maybe the prohibition against killing, injuring, and thieving was just a summary of what Liu's laws were intended to prevent, or was supposed to impress people with the directness of his rule. In any case, the simple statement was an effective way to tell his subjects what he thought was important, even if it was too brief to serve as a law code for running an enormous and complicated state.

bathroom, and then, as the *History of the Han* says, "Leaving behind carriage and officials, he fled alone on horseback," leaving Xiang Yu in charge—at least for the time being.

Unlike Liu Bang, who had kept things peaceful when he took over the capital, Xiang Yu burned most of the city to the ground, killing thousands of inhabitants. This couldn't have won him many supporters in the capital. He decided to allow Liu Bang to become King of Han, a region in northern Sichuan province.

Liu was enraged at the double cross. After all, he had been the first to enter the capital, and he should have been ruling it. Instead, his rival had given him a small and far-off kingdom to govern.



An 18th-century Chinese painter gave the peasant Liu Bang a royal appearance, foretelling his later rise to emperor. From humble beginnings, Liu Bang would go on to found the Han dynasty.

Liu went on the offensive. His army took control of the whole area around the capital. He went on to capture the state of Chu, Xiang Yu's base of power. Liu had some close calls—in 205 BCE, Xiang almost captured him, and in 204 BCE Xiang challenged him to a duel to settle the whole matter. Liu thought this proposal was outrageous, and he made a long speech denouncing Xiang. “You as a vassal killed your lord,” he said, “you killed those who had already surrendered, you governed unjustly, and you led people in taking an oath then did not keep to it. The world has no place for a traitor without principles.” He concluded scornfully, “I am leading my righteous troops, in obedience to the various lords, to execute the remaining bandits. I would send a criminal who managed to escape execution to strike you down. Why should I bother to fight a duel with you myself?”

Now it was Xiang's turn to lose his temper. To be threatened with death at the hands of a condemned criminal! This was too much. He or one of his men shot Liu in the chest with a crossbow. Liu didn't want to let his men know how badly he was hurt, so he sneered, “This slave has hit me in the toe.” (Of course Xiang wasn't a slave, but calling him one was a serious insult).

Finally, in 203 BCE, Liu's forces outmaneuvered Xiang's army in a battle. Xiang decided to go down fighting. According to the *Record of the Historian*, written about 100 years later, “King Xiang charged, beheading one officer and killing almost a hundred men; when he reassembled his cavalymen, he had lost only two of them.” He plunged into battle again and again. When he realized he was cornered, he said to a Han cavalry officer, “Aren't you an old acquaintance of mine?” The officer took a good look at him, and then called to another officer, “Here is King Xiang!”

“I hear,” the king said coolly, “that Liu Bang, the leader of the Han, has put a price on my head of a thousand gold pieces and a town with ten thousand homes. I'll do you a favor.” And he cut his own throat.

Liu Bang was now emperor. He made a new capital called Chang'an, or Everlasting Peace, and poured money

“ Ban Gu, *History of the Han*, first century CE

“ Sima Qian, “Basic Annals,” *Record of the Historian*, about 100 BCE

“ Sima Qian, “Basic Annals,” *Record of the Historian*, about 100 BCE

THE PEOPLE OF THE HAN

Even today the Chinese people call themselves “people of the Han” (*Hanren*) and refer to their language as “the Han language.”

A bureaucracy is a large number of officials, usually in a strict rank order. Each official has a specific job. The Chinese had the largest and longest-lasting bureaucracy in history.

into making it the grandest city in the known world. He had a magnificent new palace built. To govern his enormous new empire, he created a **bureaucracy** to manage affairs. He fought off attacks by others who wanted to take over, and battled against foreign tribes.

He never forgot his peasant origins, though. He was scornful of scholars, and once urinated into a scholar's hat (the man wasn't wearing it at the time). It was not only scholars whom he disliked, however. Liu didn't trust merchants, and he didn't approve of military men being in prominent positions in the government.

So who was left to help the new emperor run things? He chose landowners, the people with whom Liu had worked so successfully as leader of his *ting*. Liu began putting men from this class into the government, and families sent him their most capable sons.

Liu Bang was a popular leader. When he passed through his home region of Pei late in his life, children sang songs for him. He told the people that they didn't have to pay taxes, which must have made him even more popular.

Liu was not only a humble peasant who ended up as emperor, but he was the founder of the great Han dynasty. For four centuries after his death, Han emperors worshipped him as their **Gaozu**, or "Lofty Ancestor."

高祖

gao + *zu* = "high," "lofty" + "ancestor"

*"A great wind arises, the clouds are borne aloft,
Having awed all within the seas, I return to my home.
Where shall I find valiant knights to guard the four quarters?"*

—Liu Bang, "Song of the Great Wind," *Shiji*, about 100 BCE