

## CHAPTER 8

66 CONVERSATIONS  
OF THE STATES AND  
BOOK OF POETRY

# THE STORY OF SHENSHENG

## SACRIFICE AND STATEHOOD

Adjusting to a stepparent can be difficult. Shensheng, the oldest son of Duke Xian of Jin, had more reason than most to be unhappy with his father's new wife.

Duke Xian ruled Jin, a state that owed allegiance to the Zhou rulers, from 676 to 651 BCE. The Zhou had founded this state, which was located between the Yellow River and the Fen River in what is now Shanxi Province. Jin was a barrier between the non-Chinese in its northern area and the Zhou capital due south, across the Yellow River. The people of Jin were a mix of groups, including the Rong, a tribe the Chinese considered barbarians.

Duke Xian had three sons, including Shensheng, when he went to war against the Rong. War was always dangerous, but it seemed as if even Heaven was against the duke in this one. His **diviner**, Su, had told Xian not to go, saying that the cracks on the oracle bones he used to tell the future looked ominous. Su said, according to the anonymous fourth-century BCE *Conversations of the States*,

A diviner foretells the future, often by reading signs from nature or by interpreting the meaning of seemingly random events. Chinese diviners count sticks, toss coins, and use astrology and utterances from mediums to tell the future.

66 Anonymous, *Conversations of the States*, fourth century BCE

the crack . . . seems like a mouth holding a bone and the teeth . . . seem to be playing with the bone. They will gnash together, symbolizing alternating victory and defeat. . . . Moreover, I fear that if there are mouths [that say bad things about you], they will lead the people and the important families to transfer their allegiance from you.

Su's conclusion was, "You will win, but it will be unlucky." The duke went ahead with the war anyway. And at first it appeared that the diviner's gloomy reading of the cracks had been totally off base. Not only did Xian conquer his enemy, as expected, but he also brought home a new wife, a Rong princess who became known as Lady Li.



The king's name is inscribed on this bronze cauldron. A descendant of the king's probably had the vessel made for use in sacrifices to his illustrious ancestor.

At the feast celebrating his victory, Duke Xian told a servant to fill Su's cup with wine, but not to give him any of the meat from the animal that had been sacrificed to the gods as thanks for his success. According to the *Conversations of the States*, Xian denied Su the sacred food because his prophecy of bad luck had been false. "To defeat a state and obtain a wife," he said, "what could be luckier than this?"

Lady Li soon became the duke's favorite wife (men could have more than one wife, and rulers often had many), and they had a son. The idea that her child would never be duke because he had three older brothers bothered Li so much that she made up her mind to get rid of her stepsons. She started with Shensheng, saying things that cast doubts on his good character. Then she asked her husband to send the three brothers to rule far-off cities.

66 Anonymous, *Conversations of the States*, fourth century BCE

So now her three stepsons were out of the capital and some people were wondering whether the rumors she had spread about Shensheng were true. Then the duke put Shensheng in charge of an army that was invading another state. One of Duke Xian's knights was suspicious about this move. He thought it looked designed to harm Shensheng. If Shensheng was successful, he said, people would be envious and resentful of him, and if he lost, everyone would blame him for the failure. The knight warned Shensheng that his father was putting him in a no-win situation.

But Shensheng was virtuous. A virtuous man always obeyed the orders of his father and his lord, who happened, in Shensheng's case, to be the same person. He was victorious in this battle and then in another one against a different group of "barbarians." The knight was right; despite (or because of) these victories, the evil gossip that people were spreading about Shensheng grew worse.

Reverse psychology is convincing someone to do something by pretending you want them to do the opposite.

Since her attempts to get her stepson killed off weren't succeeding, Lady Li tried **reverse psychology** on her husband. She went to the duke in tears and told him that Shensheng was a wonderful man—kind yet powerful, forgiving, compassionate—everything a son and a ruler should be. Lady Li told the duke that she was sure that Shensheng was concerned that his father's love for Li was distracting him from ruling his country. She said that her stepson was so honorable that concern for the state would make him try to take over his father's throne. Lady Li told the duke to kill her to remove this threat. The duke refused (Lady Li must have been relieved) and said he would take care of his son's ambition to rule. But Li's "noble" offer of self-sacrifice to save her husband's position must have made him suspicious of his oldest son, and even more confident of his wife.

Now that the duke's mind-set toward his son was mistrustful, it was time for Lady Li's final step. She told Shensheng, "Last night the ruler dreamt of Lady Jiang of Qi [Shensheng's mother]." In Chinese belief, a dead person would appear in a dream only when he or she was unhappy about something. Li told Shensheng that his mother's

spirit must be restless, and that for her to rest in peace, he, the oldest son, “must quickly offer a sacrifice to her.”

Sacrifice was an important way to coax the spirits of the dead to be favorable to the person performing the procedure. The ritual had two parts. First, food was prepared with a great deal of religious ceremony. A poem in the *Book of Poetry*, written in the seventh century BCE, shows how every step of the ritual was holy:

In due order, treading carefully,  
We purify the oxen and sheep.  
We carry out the rice-offering, the harvest offering,  
Now baking, now boiling,  
Now setting out and arranging,  
Praying and sacrificing at the gate.

The food was then offered to the ancestral spirits.

“ Anonymous, *Conversations of the States*, fourth century BCE

“ Anonymous, *Book of Poetry*, seventh century BCE



*Sacrifices to ancestors were solemn occasions. The participants followed precise guidelines about each detail of the ritual—the procedure, dress, and language—to ensure the success of the ceremony. Here, relatives offer food and drink to seven generations of ancestors.*

### THE AUGUST PERSONATOR

How do you sacrifice to someone who isn't there? One of the dead ancestor's grandsons (if the ancestor was a man) or granddaughters-in-law (if the ancestor was a woman) would be chosen to act as his or her "personator," or stand-in. The personator was treated as the ghost of the dead person and would eat and drink the sacrificial offerings. The personator would then give blessings to the other participants in the ritual.

The second part of the ritual was a feast where the descendants of the spirits shared the now-holy food among themselves and with their guests. It was a very special occasion, not only because it involved honoring one's ancestors, but also because people had a good meal, which was a luxury. Meat was expensive, and the only time that people were supposed to eat it was as part of a sacrifice.

A good son would not hesitate to perform the elaborate and costly sacrificial ritual. Despite his stepmother's rumors, Shensheng had always acted like a good son and a loyal subject. After all, he had risked his life and his reputation rather than disobey his father and his lord, even when a trusted official warned him against that action. He had gone off to rule Quwo, a faraway city, when his father ordered him there. So now that his dead mother appeared to be unhappy, he would do what a good son should do, and perform a sacrifice.

Lady Li had been very clever. She planned everything so that the duke would be away hunting when Shensheng arrived from Quwo with the blessed foods. She took advantage of her husband's absence, according to the *Conversations of the States*, to poison the wine and the meat. Then Duke Xian came home, and began the ritual by pouring wine on the earth:

When the duke sacrificed some [wine] to the earth, the ground swelled up. Shensheng was frightened and left. Lady Li gave some of the meat to a dog and the dog died. She had a minor official drink some of the wine and he also died.

*The Chinese of the Eastern Zhou period prized jewelry not only for its beauty, but also for its symbolic value. A ruler would wear a precious necklace during rituals to show off his wealth and power.*



66 Anonymous, *Conversations of the States*, fourth century BCE

Shensheng knew that he was innocent of trying to poison his father, but he also knew that he would be blamed. If he maintained his innocence and people believed him, they would be angry with his father—something unthinkable for this dutiful son and subject. They might even think that his father, their leader, was the one who had poisoned the meat. His advisers urged him to flee out of the duke's reach. Shensheng refused, saying, "To abandon your lord to escape a criminal charge is to flee from death. . . . If the charges are proved, then leaving will make the crime worse. . . . Death cannot be avoided. I will await my fate."

So what could Shensheng do? Once again, he found himself in a no-win situation. If he ran away, he would shame his father, which a good son should never do, and betray his lord, which a good subject should never do. If he stayed, he would most likely be killed. To make matters worse, his stepmother

“” Anonymous, *Conversations of the States*, fourth century BCE

came to see him and said, weeping, "If you can stand to do this to your father, what about the people of the state? . . . If you kill your father [by causing the people to lose confidence in him] . . . who will consider this a benefit? These actions are all despised by the citizens. It will be difficult for you to live long."

“” Anonymous, *Conversations of the States*, fourth century BCE

For a person of Shensheng's culture in such a situation, there was only one solution: suicide. He hanged himself in the temple. That way, he shamed no one and did not harm his father's reputation. Just before he took his life, he said, "I do not dare to regret my death."

An added benefit was that he could look forward to becoming a ghost and haunting his stepmother.

Shensheng's two other brothers evidently didn't suffer from as strong a conscience as he did. They both fled, and later wound up ruling the state of Jin. After Duke Xian died, supporters of the original three brothers killed Lady Li and her children, and the oldest surviving brother took the throne.

Historians are not sure how much of this story is true. While the major people involved certainly existed, parts of the story sound like a fairy tale: the three brothers, the vir-

### A CHINESE CINDERELLA

A very old Chinese story is similar to the tale known in English as "Cinderella." After her father dies, a virtuous girl named Yexian is abused by her stepmother, who makes her do difficult and dangerous work. Yexian is saved by the bones of a magical fish to which she had been kind when it was alive. She prays to the bones for elegant clothes to attend a festival. When the stepsisters spot her at the festival, she hurries away, losing her golden slipper. The king is curious as to who could be the owner of such a beautiful shoe, and he has all the women in the kingdom try it on. When it fits Yexian, the king marries her.

tuous son, the wicked stepmother. It's possible that fact and fiction are intertwined in this tale, but unless an archaeologist stumbles upon documents that either support or dispute the facts, we will never know for sure.

Whether or not the details of the story of Shensheng are factually accurate, the way it praises virtues such as obedience and loyalty to one's father shows how important these values were in Chinese society at that time. Even though Shensheng knew he was being used by his evil stepmother and might end up dead because of it, he always obeyed his father without question and put his father's reputation above his own.

Being forced into suicide might not seem like much of a reward for good behavior, but in the Chinese belief system it was possible for Shensheng to get revenge later. While he was alive Shensheng did everything that a good and noble son should do, but once he became a spirit, he was no longer bound by earthly expectations. He was free to haunt and even harm those who had done him wrong. Many people must have thought that Shensheng's ghost was somehow involved in the death of the woman who had brought about his downfall and the children for whose sake she had behaved so treacherously.



*The charcoal pieces in this portable cooking pot, found in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng, were ready to be lit whenever the dead man became hungry.*