

4.3 THE RISE OF THE HAN

The emergence of the Han Dynasty represents the full confluence of two seemingly contradictory trends that had been increasingly paired since the time of Shang Yang: meritocracy and autocracy. The First Emperor, through his conscious exaltation of his throne and his thorough rejection of Zhou feudalism and hereditary privilege, had created the conditions for the institutionalization of these forces.

The founder of the Han Dynasty, Liu Pang, was from a peasant family; during the Qin he served as a petty official in a peripheral region of China. He succeeded to the imperial throne only by prevailing in a civil war that lasted for over four years after the surrender of Ziying, the last ruler of the Qin.

His principal opponent during that period was a man named Xiang Yu, who represented everything that Liu Bang was not. Xiang Yu was of patrician stock, a scion of the house of Chu, and the model of a Zhou-style warrior: brave, skillful, elegant, and bloodthirsty. Xiang Yu began as the leader of the very forces that brought Liu Bang to power, and was, for a time, acknowledged by all, including Liu, to be the founder of the successor dynasty to the Qin. Yet he was destroyed by the supporters of a subordinate from the peasant class. Liu Bang ascended the throne in 202 B.C.,* less than twenty years after the end of the Warring States period. How confounding it must have been to the elder generation to see a peasant occupying the seat of power!

An overview of the civil wars (209-202)

Chen She's uprising, 209-208. The civil wars that gave rise to the Han began with the revolt of Chen She, which was discussed earlier. Chen was from the region of Chu. His revolt began there, and the most widespread support for the overthrow of the Qin arose in the southeastern portion of the country, where the state of Chu had once been.

Soon after he had raised his forces, Chen She had himself declared the king of Chu. One of Chen's generals, whom he had sent north to "liberate" the region that had formerly belonged to the state of Zhao, closed his successful campaign by proclaiming himself king of Zhao, a title that Chen She grudgingly accepted in order to avoid a split in the rebelling forces. Soon other allies had declared themselves kings in Yan and Qi. It appeared that the downfall of the Qin was not shaping into a new contest for the imperial throne, but into a revival of the feudal states.**

*The Han ruling house dated its accession from 206, the year succeeding the Qin abdication. However, Liu Bang did not actually claim the throne and stage a coronation until 202.

**Recall that the eunuch Zhao Gao was suspected of reviving the title of "king" in Qin with similar expectations.

After marching his forces close to the Qin capital of Xianyang, Chen She suffered a severe defeat at the hands of the very capable generals of Qin. He retreated eastwards, and within six months he was killed.

The struggle for the Chu throne, 208. After Chen She's death, one of his associates set himself up as king of Chu and proceeded to reorganize the rebel forces. This transfer of the title was opposed by members of the Xiang clan in Chu, one of the strongest remaining patrician families resident in the region, and the family to which Xiang Yu belonged. They raised forces to attack the new rebel king of Chu, and the pretender was killed in battle. The Xiangs were eager for the throne; but fearful that they did not have the necessary signs of legitimacy to hold it, they elected in the end to enthrone the grandson of the last king of Warring States Chu, whom they searched out herding sheep for a local landowner. This man became a puppet ruler, under the control of the Xiangs.

With the Xiangs in power in Chu, the rebellion, which had had not yet overthrown the Qin, but only created a variety of new power centers which were awaiting the arrival of the Qin military response, took on a new direction. The Xiangs were capable leaders, and their goal was to gain control of the entire empire. Among the allies whom they absorbed into their rebellion was Liu Bang, who had raised a small local rebellion near his home city, near the old border between Chu and Qi.

The invasion of Qin, 207. Shortly after the Xiangs gained control in Chu and reunified the rebellion, the leader of the Xiang clan was killed in battle. His nephew, Xiang Yu, soon succeeded in gaining a leading role in the uprising. However, his stature was not yet as great as his late uncle's. With power less unified among the Chu-based leaders, the puppet king of Chu was actually able to exercise some power in adjudicating how the rebel forces should be deployed. A coordinated attack was planned against the various Qin armies and stronghold territories, and much to his dismay, Xiang Yu was assigned to lead a campaign against Qin forces in the north before having leave to invade the Qin homeland. The rebel leaders had made an agreement that whoever first took the city of Xianyang would lay claim to the throne of Qin, and Xiang Yu wished to obtain that title without delay.

Liu Bang was dispatched to lead an army to secure the southern portions of the Qin region. This he was able to do easily, and his armies moved so rapidly that he soon found himself in contact with the generals of the main Qin forces, who sent envoys to propose to Liu Bang a power sharing arrangement in Qin, whereby Liu would become king of a portion of the "land within the passes." This was tempting bait for a peasant colonel, but his advisors convinced him instead to attempt a surprising military maneuver. While Xiang Yu was preparing for a frontal assault on the Hangu Pass, Liu Bang led his forces through a far less well known pass that connected Qin to the south. His strategy was a spectacular success, and his armies entered Xianyang while Xiang Yu was still far distant. It was Liu Bang who accepted the surrender of the Ziyang.

The sack of Xianyang, 207. Liu Bang was in a delicate position. According to the agreement among the various leaders of the rebellion, the man who first seized Xianyang was supposed to become the new king of Qin. But Liu knew that Xiang Yu was determined to possess this title, and also that Xiang Yu's prestige and power far exceeded his own. While occupying Xianyang, Liu

was careful to exercise only a minimum of power. He spared the life of Ziyang and neither destroyed property nor attempted to enforce his power. Instead he waited.

Xiang Yu, enraged by what he saw as treachery by Liu Bang, determined to enter Qin and murder his fellow rebel. But when his army, four times the size of Liu Bang's, finally arrived, Liu Bang disarmed him by apologizing for entering Qin first. Liu then withdrew with his forces.

Xiang Yu immediately murdered Ziyang and then set out to destroy Xianyang, authorizing massive burning and looting. The palaces and archives of Qin were destroyed, and the First Emperor's grave plundered.

The civil war, 206-202. Initially, Xiang Yu contented himself with a division of the empire and an acknowledgment of the king of Chu as the new emperor of China, known as the "Righteous Emperor." Under the new emperor, the system of patrician estates was to be restored, Xiang Yu taking title to a vast region comprising most of the old states of Qin and Chu. Prominent leaders in the rebellion were presented with thrones in various parts of the empire. Liu Bang was given title over the relatively undesirable territories to the south of Qin, the Han River valley, called Han.* This was viewed by his closest advisors as a calculated insult.

Shortly thereafter, Xiang Yu arranged the assassination of the Righteous Emperor and it became clear that Xiang Yu intended in time to make his way to the imperial throne. Xiang Yu was a much admired man, able and generous to his friends, but his temperament was notoriously turbulent and he was widely feared. Many of the newly enthroned kings nervously began to broaden their own power bases, and within months, the entire empire was in a state of civil war.

The civil war followed a complex course. There were many kings vying for different levels of power and their armies, often composed of recruits from the kings' original homes rather than their new kingdoms, were extremely mobile and unstable. Alliances among kings and generals formed quickly and dissolved just as fast. Over time, the leading challengers to Xiang Yu's power gradually gravitated to the standard of Liu Bang, who, whatever his personal strengths or shortcomings, seems to have started off with a very gifted set of advisors and warriors.

By 203, Xiang Yu and Liu Bang had become the sole contenders for the imperial throne and Xiang Yu even challenged Liu Bang to single combat (an incident narrated below). Several times, the superior strength of Xiang Yu's armies placed Liu Bang in desperate straits, but Xiang Yu failed to finish off Liu Bang and time was on Liu's side. Liu's army had begun as an uncoordinated league of Xiang Yu's enemies, but with each passing month, Liu Bang increased his control over his forces. In the initial weeks of 202, Xiang Yu's forces were finally routed decisively at the battle of Gaixia, and Xiang Yu himself died in the field.

On the day corresponding to February 28, 202 B.C., Liu Bang was crowned ruler of the Han empire, successor to the emperors of the Qin.

*The Han Dynasty took its name from this region, and Liu Bang's title to the throne of Han was viewed as the beginning of the dynasty.

Tales of Xiang Yu and Liu Bang

Sima Qian sketches portraits of the two main protagonists of the civil war that combine traditional conventions of hagiography (mythologized biography) with subtly revealing portraits. He makes it very clear that he admires Xiang Yu, and his biography of Xiang Yu is placed in the section of his work reserved for dynastic kings, indicating that he accepts Xiang Yu as a recipient of the Mandate. But Sima Qian was, after all, the chief astrologer-historian of the Han imperial court, and his principal loyalties lay with the Han (though we will later learn of some intimate reasons why those loyalties might have had unusually constrained limits). Nevertheless when we examine his descriptions of Liu Bang, the “sage” founder of this great dynasty, there are aspects that go beyond frankness and border on slander.

The characters of Liu Bang and Xiang Yu, so representative of China's past and its future, would be worth examining in some detail under any circumstances. But the selections from the *Shiji* stories of their lives that follow have also been chosen because, as particularly revealing points of character study, their narrative features may illustrate aspects of the perspectives that Sima Qian brought to his historiography of the Han.

The marvelous early life of Liu Bang

Emperor Gao* was a resident of the Zhongyang ward of Feng city, in the district of Pei. He belonged to the family of Liu, and the personal name by which he was addressed in public company was Ji. His father is referred to as the High Duke and his mother as Dame Liu.

Once, before he was born, Dame Liu fell asleep on the bank of a large lake and dreamt that she encountered a spirit. While she dreamt, the sky grew dark with thunder and lightning, and when the High Duke went to find her, he saw a scaly dragon hovering over her. After this she became pregnant and gave birth to Liu Bang.

Liu Bang had a high nose and a dragonlike visage, a fine beard on his chin and cheeks. On his left thigh he had seventy-two black moles.** He was kind and loving towards others; he was generous and quick to understand others' needs. He always had great ideas and never concerned himself with the ordinary business of a family man.

When Liu Bang reached adulthood, he was given an appointment as head of the Si River Precinct. He treated all the other officials in the office with insulting familiarity. He loved wine and women and often used went to the shops of Dame Wang or Matron Wu and drink on credit. When he lay in a drunken stupor, the old women would always be amazed

*Sima Qian generally refers to Liu Bang as Gaozu (High Ancestor, or Emperor Gao), though when inventing dialogue for the story of Liu Bang's rise, he portrays others use Liu Bang's formal public name, Liu Ji. Since the events here all concern the pre-Han period, I have replaced “Gaozu” with Liu Bang, the personal name by which he is known to history. In fact, during the Han, his personal name, “Bang,” was banned from use out of respect.

** Seventy-two is frequently encountered as a number of vague cosmic significance in ancient Chinese texts.

to see a dragon hovering over him. And whenever he loitered drinking they would sell several times as much wine as usual. In light of such wondrous things, at year's end these two shops would always tear up his bill and clear his account.

Liu Bang was once sent to perform his corvée labor duties in the Qin capital city of Xianyang. On that occasion, the Imperial carriage rode in public view and Liu Bang caught sight of the First Emperor himself. Sighing deeply he said, "Ah, this is the way a great man should be."

There was a friend of the magistrate of Pei, Squire Lü of Shanfu, who came to Pei to escape some enemy and lodged as a guest under the magistrate's protection. Hearing that a distinguished guest had come to visit the magistrate, all the local officers and wealthy town leaders joined a formal reception for him. Xiao He was director of officers at the time, and he supervised the presentation of gifts.* He announced to all these prominent men, "Anyone whose gift amounts to less than one thousand cash will be seated in the lower section of the hall." Liu Bang, who as a precinct head habitually treated other officers with disdain, falsely wrote on his calling card: "With best wishes, ten thousand cash," though in fact he had not brought so much as a single coin. When his card was sent in, Master Lü was very surprised. He rose and went to greet him personally at the gate. Master Lü liked to read faces and as soon as he saw Liu Bang's features he assumed an attitude of great respect and escorted him to a seat. Xiao He said to Master Lü, "Liu Ji has always talked big, but he has little to show for it." Meanwhile, Liu Bang, showing insulting disdain for the other guests, unceremoniously proceeded to a seat of honor.

As the drinking came towards its end, Master Lü indicated by a glance at Liu Bang that he wished him to remain, so Liu Bang sat drinking until he was the last guest. Then Master Lü said to him, "Since my youth I have liked to read faces, and many are the faces I have read. None has ever shown signs like yours. I urge you to take good care of yourself, and I have a daughter whom I wish you to take as your wife and helpmate."

When the party was over, Master Lü's wife scolded him angrily. "You have always anticipated an exceptional match for this girl and planned to marry her to a distinguished man. The magistrate of Pei has treated you kindly, yet when he asked for her hand, you would not give your consent. How can you allow yourself to blindly give her to Liu Ji?"

"This is not something a woman or child could understand!" replied Master Lü. And in the end he did indeed marry the girl to Liu Ji. This daughter of Master Lü ultimately became Empress Lü and gave birth to Emperor Hui and Princess Yuan of Lu.

(*Shiji* 8.341-45)

*Xiao He later enjoyed a long career as a valued aide and prime minister to Liu Bang.

The unusual qualities of the young Xiang Yu

Xiang Yu, whose polite public name was Ji,* was a native of Xiaxiang County. He was twenty-four when he first took up arms. His father's youngest brother was Xiang Liang, and Xiang Liang's father was Xiang Yan. Xiang Yan had been a chief general of the state of Chu whose death had been brought about by the Qin general Wang Jian. The Xiang family had been generals of Chu for generations and had been granted an hereditary estate in the region of Xiang. It was from this that the family had taken its name.

When Xiang Yu was a boy, having failed in his studies of the art of writing, he abandoned it to study swordsmanship, but he failed at this too. When Xiang Liang had become angry with him Xiang Yu said, "Writing is only good for signing one's name. As for swordsmanship, it only makes you a match for a single enemy, it's not worth studying either. I want to learn how to be the match of ten thousand enemies!" Thereupon, Xiang Liang began to teach him the strategies of warfare, which delighted Xiang Yu. But once Xiang Yu grasped the main ideas he once again refused to study in full. . . .

The First Emperor of Qin came on a touring procession to Kuaiji, and as his procession crossed the River Zhe, Xiang Liang and Xiang Yu stood on the bank to catch sight of him. Xiang Yu said "A person could topple a man like that and take his place!" Xiang Liang clapped his hand over Xiang Yu's mouth. "No wild talk!" he said, "They'll execute us and our families besides!" But from then on Xiang Liang regarded his nephew as exceptional. *(Shiji 7.295-96)*

Liu Bang's defeat at Pengcheng

In 205, Liu Bang's forces captured Xiang Yu's stronghold of the city of Pengcheng, near the city of Pei, where he had once himself been magistrate. Liu, savoring this triumph, "seized its treasures and beautiful women and spent his days in feasting and revelry." Xiang Yu led his army back to Pengcheng and decisively drove Liu Bang's troops from the city. This is the story of Liu Bang's escape.

Xiang Yu's troops had encircled Liu Bang threefold when a great wind arose from the northwest, toppling trees, blowing rooftops off houses, and raising clouds of dust and pebbles so that the sky was shrouded and the day turned dark. The storm advanced towards the Chu army; thrown into confusion it scattered in collapse and Liu Bang was able to slip away with a few dozen horsemen.

Liu Bang hoped to pass through his old home of Pei and gather up his family before fleeing west, but Xiang Yu sent men to pursue him at Pei and seize the members of his family.

* Although Sima Qian generally uses the name Xiang Yu, the early portions of the account use the polite, public name, Xiang Ji. For clarity here, the opening sentence is modified and the personal name Yu employed throughout.

The family fled from them into hiding and they were not there to meet Liu Bang. However, he encountered his son and daughter as he traveled on the road, and he took them up in his chariot as he fled.

But as the horsemen of Chu closed behind him in pursuit, Liu Bang became desperate, and pushed his son and daughter toppling from of the chariot. But his chariot driver, Lord Teng, stopped and stepped down to gather them back in. He did this again and again, until the third time Lord Teng finally said, “Desperate though we may be in this chase, it will not do to toss the children out!”

(Shiji 7.322)

What does this anecdote say about the character of Liu Bang, and why would the Han historian Sima Qian wish to include this sort of gossip in his account of the Han founder's romantic rise to power?

Xiang Yu challenges Liu Bang

By 203 the forces of Liu and Xiang seemed to have reached a stalemate. The troops of the two leaders chased each other in circles in the east, until at last they found themselves separated from each other by the River Si, with neither side ready to initiate the next confrontation. Xiang Yu, trained as a warrior, sought to reduce the conflict to single combat between himself and the peasant-born Liu Bang. His challenge to Liu was a test of Liu's nobility of character – his ability to live up to the ideals of the traditional patrician class. Liu managed to respond with the tool of the common man: rhetoric. The list of acts that Liu enumerates below will give you a good indication of why Xiang Yu's patrician style of leadership failed to attract masses of men to support his efforts to squelch a man of Liu Bang's peasant origins.

For many days the armies of Chu and Han maintained their respective positions without initiating any resolution. Their warriors endured bitter conditions among the ranks while old men and boys were exhausted in transporting provisions for them. During this stalemate, Liu Bang and Xiang Yu approached on either side of the ravine of Guangwu and spoke to one another across it.

Xiang Yu challenged Liu Bang to meet him in single combat, but Liu Bang just berated him. “At first, when together we received our commands from King Huai of Chu, we agreed that whoever first entered the land beyond the Pass subdued it reign as king there. But you turned your back on this agreement and made me king of Shu and Han instead. This was your first crime. Feigning receipt of an order from King Huai, you murdered Lord Marshall Song Yi and elevated yourself to his position. This was your second crime. After you had rescued Zhao you should have returned to report to King Huai, but instead you commandeered the troops of the other lords general and entered the Pass. This was your third crime. King Huai had pledged that whoever entered the territories of Qin would commit no pillage. Yet you burned the palaces of Qin, plundered the tomb of the First Emperor, and seized its treasures as your private booty. This was your fourth crime. You

brutally executed Ziying of Qin, a king who had willingly surrendered. This was your fifth crime. At Xin'an you slaughtered in a mass grave two hundred thousand men of Qin whom you had tricked into surrender and made their general, Zhang Han, a king. This was your sixth crime. You enfeoffed all your generals as kings in the best lands and drove out the former lords, throwing their followers into strife and revolt. This was your seventh crime. You drove the Righteous Emperor out of Pengcheng and set up your own capital there, seized the territory of the king of Han and made yourself ruler of the combined areas of Liang and Chu, helping yourself to whatever you wanted. This was your eighth crime. You sent a man to covertly assassinate the Righteous Emperor at Jiangnan. This was your ninth crime. A subject who assassinates his lord, a murderer of those who have surrendered to him, a ruler without justice, and a beaker of covenants – such a one the world cannot abide. Such treason and wanton immorality is your tenth crime. I have raised a righteous army and joined with the other lords general to punish you for your wicked banditry. I can order branded convicts to attack and kill you, my Lord – why would I bother to engage with you in single combat?"

Xiang Yu flew into a rage. Gripping a crossbow that he had concealed, he shot Liu Bang and wounded him in the chest. But Liu Bang grabbed his foot and called out, "The scoundrel has hit my toe!"

(Shiji 8.376)

The death of Xiang Yu

Xiang Yu's army built a walled camp at Gaixia, but he had few soldiers left and his supplies were exhausted. They were encircled several lines deep by the Han army, which had been joined by the forces of the other leaders. That night from all directions they heard the surrounding armies of Han singing the songs of Chu. Startled to hear them, Xiang Yu cried out, "Have the Han already occupied Chu territories? How many men of Chu they have with them!" Then he rose in the night and drank within the curtains of his tent. With him there was a beautiful woman named Yu, who followed Xiang Yu as his constant companion, as much a part of his retinue as his famous steed Zhui, which he always rode. Now, Xiang Yu began to chant to her a song filled with his feelings of grief and regret.

My strength once lifted hills – hey!
 My force enclosed the world;
 But times have run against me – hey!
 And Zhui can run no more.
 When Zhui can run no more – hey!
 What then can I do?
 Oh, Yu – hey! Oh, Yu – hey!
 What can I do for you?

Xiang Yu sang the song several times over, and then Yu lifted her voice in harmony. Ranks of tears streamed down Xiang Yu's face, and all those about him wept with heads bowed, unable to bear the sight. Then Xiang Yu bolted out and leapt on his horse. Over eight hundred of his cavalry joined under his banner, and they all raced into the night, bursting through the encirclement and galloping south.

It was not until dawn that the Han armies realized what had happened. Liu Bang ordered Guan Ying, his cavalry general, to pursue Xiang Yu with a force of five thousand horsemen. Xiang Yu fled south across the Huai River, but only about a hundred of his cavalry were able to stay with him. When he came to Yinling he lost his way and had to ask an old farmer for directions. But the farmer deceived him: he told Xiang Yu to turn towards the left, and when he rode to the left he soon became mired in broad marshlands, so that the pursuing troops of the Han were able to catch up with him.

Xiang Yu once more gathered his men and led them off to the east, but by the time they reached Dongcheng, only twenty-eight horsemen remained, while the Han cavalry chasing him numbered several thousand.

Xiang Yu now realized that there was no way left for him to escape. He addressed his horsemen, saying, "It is now eight years since I first raised troops, and in that time I have myself fought in over seventy battles. All I faced were destroyed, all I struck surrendered. Never once did I flee in defeat, and so I became hegemon over the world. In the end I have been hemmed up in this trap. Yet even so, it is Heaven that destroys me, not any fault in battle that I have committed! I have resolved to die on this day. But before I do, permit me first to charge the enemy – I shall certainly prevail over them three times and on your behalf I shall break through their encirclements, cut down their general, and sever their banners. Thus you shall know it is Heaven that has destroyed me, not any fault in battle that I have committed!"

Then he divided his horsemen into four groups and faced them towards the four directions. With the Han army encircling their hill several layers deep, Xiang Yu said to his men, "I will get that general there for you!" He ordered all four groups to gallop down and reform in three groups to east the hill. With a great shout he led them galloping down. The Han troops scattered in confusion and in the melee Xiang Yu sliced off the head of the general he had pointed to.

At this time Yang Xi was chief general of the cavalry. He led his horsemen in pursuit of Xiang Yu, but Xiang Yu glared at them and cursed so fiercely that men and horses fled in fright some distance away.

Xiang Yu rejoined his men, who had formed into three groups as planned. The Han army did not know which group Xiang Yu was with, so they too divided into three groups

and again surrounded Xiang Yu's forces. Once again Xiang Yu galloped forth and this time beheaded a Han colonel while slaughtering many dozens of men. When he gathered his horsemen together once again, only two of them had been lost. He addressed those who remained. "What do you say to that?" he asked. The horsemen bowed before him and replied, "It is as you said it would be, great King."

At this time Xiang Yu's plan was to go east to the ford across the Yangzi River at Wujiang. The headman of Wujiang had docked a boat by the riverbank, waiting for Xiang Yu's arrival. He addressed Xiang Yu saying, "Though the area on the east bank of the river is small, it is still some thousand *li* square and its people are numbered by the hundred thousands. It is worthy of a king. I beg you to cross over quickly. At present, I alone possess a boat. When the Han army gets here they will have no means to cross."

Xiang Yu laughed. "With Heaven itself destroying me," he said, "what purpose would it serve for me to cross the river? There was a time when I crossed the Yangzi westward, and with eight thousand sons and younger brothers of the lands to the east, but today not one of them returns. Though their fathers and older brothers may now take pity on me and take me as their king, how could I bear to face them? They might not speak of it to me, but how could I be so shameless as not to feel it in my heart?" Then addressing the headman he said, "I can tell that you are a man of ability. For five years I have ridden this horse and I have never seen another that could match him. He once traveled a thousand *li* in a single day! I cannot bear to kill him – I present him to you."

Then Xiang Yu ordered his men to dismount and brandishing short swords to join the enemy in battle. Xiang Yu alone killed several hundred men and himself suffered ten wounds or more. Then over his shoulder he caught sight of the Han Marshal of Cavalry, Lü Matong. "Are you not my old friend?" he asked. Lü Matong turned his face aslant. Pointing towards him, he said to Wang Yi, "This is Xiang Yu."

"I have heard," said Xiang Yu, "that Han has offered a reward for my head: a thousand catties of gold and a fief of ten thousand households. I will do you a favor." And then he slit his throat and died.

(*Shiji* 7.333-36)

Liu Bang's assessment of the reasons for his victory

In the fifth month [of 202 B.C.], the armies were all disbanded and the soldiers returned to their homes. . . . Liu Bang hosted a banquet at the Southern Palace of Luoyang and addressed those present. "Lords and generals, I ask you all to express your true thoughts with nothing concealed. How has it come to pass that I have gained possession of the world while Xiang Yu has lost it?"

Gao Qi and Wang Ling replied. “Your majesty’s manner is arrogant and insulting towards others while Xiang Yu behaved kindly and was caring towards others. But when your majesty orders a man to attack a city or to invade a region, you reward him with a portion of the spoils. In this way the world shares your gains. Xiang Yu was jealous of worth and resented the able. He undercut those who had achieved merit and suspected worthy men. Though his army was victorious he distributed no rewards, though he captured lands he never shared the spoils. That is the reason he lost possession of the world.”

Liu Bang said, “You know one reason, but not the other. When it comes to strategies devised in army tents that will prevail on battlegrounds a thousand *li* away, I cannot compare with Zhang Liang. In bringing order to the state and comforting its people, provisioning its troops and protecting their lines of supply, I cannot compare to Xiao He. For leading allied armies of a million men to prevail on every battleground and in every siege, I cannot compare to Han Xin. These three are all men of heroic ability. And I was able to employ all three of them – *that* is how I gained possession of the world!”

(*Shiji* 8.380-81)

KEY NAMES

Liu Bang

Xiang Yu

STUDY QUESTION

The material in this section is all drawn from the Shiji by Sima Qian, the official historiographer of the Han court. By carefully examining the various anecdotes that Sima Qian chose to recount about Liu Bang and Xiang Yu, determine where you think the historian's prejudices lay, and what qualities he admired or deplored in each man.



Liu Bang



Xiang Yu

Sources

The principal source for the information here is Sima Qian's *Shiji*. Translations for all *Shiji* passages are based on the standard text edition (Zhonghua shuju) and have been made in light of the scholarly translations in William Nienhauser et al., *The Grand Scribe's Records*, Vol. 1 (Indiana University, 1995), and Burton Watson's fine literary translation, *Records of the Grand Historian*, Vol. 1 (Columbia University, 1961; rev. 1993). For an overview of the events of the civil war period, see Michael Loewe, "The Former Han Dynasty," in *The Cambridge History of China: The Ch'in and Han Empires* (Cambridge University, 1986), pp. 110-19.