

17. The Epic of Chǔ and Hàn

Shī Jì 7, 8, 48 (extracts)

China's epic, like all epics, is a tale of war. Why war?? Because war is what unifies. Courage against adversity commands universal respect, and it is in war that adversity reaches its extreme, and heroism has its greatest scope.

It is called Chǔ/Hàn Chún/Chyōu 楚漢春秋, "Chronicle of Chǔ and Hàn." Its hero is Lyóu Bāng 劉邦, the canny commoner with negligible military skills, but who, in the end, became Gāu-dzǔ 高祖, the Founding Ancestor of Hàn.

The epic begins, not with Lyóu Bāng, but with a lesser figure: Chǔn Shǔ. He too is a commoner, an anticipation of Lyóu Bāng. It was he (so the tale tells) who first came out against Chín. Here is how that went:

SJ 48. Chǔn Shǔng was a man of Yáng-chǔng; his personal name was Shǔ. Wú Gwǎng was a man of Yáng-jyǎ; his personal name was Shú. Once, when Chǔn Shǔ was young, he was working as a hired farmhand with some other men. Leaving his plowing, he went to the top of a little rise, and was lost for a long time in deep emotion. He said "If one day I become rich and famous, I will not forget you." The men laughed and answered "You are a hired plowhand, what's all this about rich and famous?"

Chǔn Shǔ sighed and said "Alas! How could the little sparrows understand the ambition of a great swan?"

In the first year of the Second Chín Emperor, in the seventh month, they sent out nine hundred men from the left side of town to garrison Yǔ-yáng; they camped on the way at Dà-dzǔ Syāng. Chǔn Shǔng and Wú Gwǎng were among those forced to go; they were made camp chiefs. It happened that there was a great downpour, and the road became impassible. They realized that they had already lost all hope of arriving by the assigned time; for missing the assigned time, the law prescribed that they should all be beheaded. Chǔn Shǔng and Wú Gwǎng then took counsel together, saying "If we go on, we will die; and if we undertake some great plan, we will die. As long as we are going to die anyway, may we not as well die in the hope of establishing a state?"

Chǔn Shǔ did establish a state in Chǔn, with himself as King. Many joined him, including several Confucians led by Kǔng Fú, the son of the last head of the Analects school. Why Confucians?? Because even a ruffian, once he is King, wants a little ceremony, a little respect for his new dignity. So Chǔn Shǔ received them; he made Fú his ritual master. Thus did Kǔng family ritualism, seemingly a distraction from the Confucian message, prove essential to the survival of Confucianism. Thus did Confucian tradition, repressed under Chín, find its first welcome among the successors of Chín.

For six months. Then Chǔn Shǔ's kingdom was overthrown, and he and his officials were killed. Among those slain was Master Kǔng Fú. But his son survived, with his colleagues, to carry the Confucian message to a later time. Confucianism had made a precarious first contact with the Imperial world.

Now we take up the tale with Lyóu Bāng, the commoner who at last succeeded where others had failed. His magical omens are what mark him out. He does not seek rulership, as Chǔn Shì had done; he is *sought out* by it:

SJ 8. Lyóu Bāng, as station chief, was escorting a group of conscript laborers to Lí-shān. Many of the laborers escaped on the way; he figured that by the time he got there, he would have lost them all. When they reached the meadows to the west of Fǔng, he stopped for a drink. Then, in the night, he released those in his care, saying “You guys beat it; I’m getting out of here too.” Among them were ten or so brave fellows who wanted to follow him.

Lyóu Bāng, feeling his wine, set out in the night across the meadow, sending one man ahead, who came back and reported “There’s a big snake blocking the path; let’s go back.” Lyóu Bāng, now drunk, said “When a brave man marches, what does he know of fear?” He went forward, drew his sword, and struck the snake, cutting it in two, so that the path lay open. He went on for several leagues, and then, overcome by intoxication, he lay down to sleep.

When those following behind came to where the snake had been, they found an old crone weeping in the night. They asked why she was weeping. She said “someone killed my son, so I am weeping for him.” The men asked how her son had come to be killed. She said “My son was the son of the God of White. He had taken the form of a snake and was lying across the path, and now the son of the God of Red has beheaded him; therefore, I weep.” The men thought she was lying, and made to take her in for questioning, but suddenly she was not to be seen. When the men came up to Lyóu Bāng, he had wakened, and they told him the story. Lyóu Bāng was secretly pleased about it. His confidence in himself increased, and his followers became day by day more in awe of him.

The colors symbolize directions. White is north, or Chin, whose power was waning; the Chǔ general Syàng Yǔ would be given a fief there. Red is west, symbolizing Hàn, where Lyóu Bāng would be granted a fief. The God of Red has cut off the inheritor of Chín, and Lyóu Bāng will rule in Syàng Yǔ’s stead.

Syàng Yǔ 項羽, of a noble Chǔ lineage, is most readers’ favorite character. His story, not that of coldly calculating Lyóu Bāng, appeals to their emotions. At first, to help the narrative build tension, he seems to have the upper hand. The crisis comes in a memorable scene, the Feast at Hùng-mǔn.

Of all the generals fighting under King Hwái of Chǔ, Lyóu Bāng, the “Prince of Pèi” has reached the Chín capital area ahead of his rival, Syàng Yǔ, and secured it. By doing this, he has threatened to found the successor dynasty. Tsáu Wú-shāng alerts Syàng Yǔ to Lyóu Bāng’s ambitions. Syàng Yǔ breaks in with his army. On the advice of his strategist Jāng Lyáng, Lyóu Bāng apologizes, and a feast is held, to confirm the new amity. Syàng Yǔ’s general Fàn Dzǔng (Yà-fǔ), sitting in the host’s northern seat, wants to kill Lyóu Bāng, and holds up a C-shaped (“Broken circle”) jade ring, as a sign that Syàng Yǔ should break with his old comrade, and thus secure his own place in history. The banquet is a confrontation between ambitious guile and heroic reluctance, with the Empire as the ultimate prize.

Then came the confrontation:

SJ 7. King Syàng that same day detained the Prince of Pèi to drink with him. King Syàng and Syáng Bwó sat facing east, Yà-fǔ sat facing south. The Prince of Pèi sat facing north, and Jāng Lyáng sat facing west. Fàn Dǔng several times caught King Syàng's eye; he thrice lifted the jade ring he wore and gestured at him with it. King Syàng was silent, and made no response. Fàn Dzǔng got up and went out; he summoned Syàng Jwāng and said to him, "Our Sovereign King is not up to it. You go in, come forward, and when the toast is done, ask leave to do a sword dance. In the course of it, strike the Prince of Pèi and kill him. If not, you and the others will soon be his prisoners." Jwāng then entered and made a toast. When the toast was done, he said "Our Sovereign King is drinking with the Prince of Pèi, but in our camp there are no amusements; I ask leave to do a sword dance." King Syàng said, "Very well." Syàng Jwāng drew his sword, got up, and danced. Syàng Bwó also drew his sword, and got up and danced, ever screening the Prince of Pèi with his body, and Jwāng was unable to strike. At this, Jāng Lyáng went to the camp gate and saw Fán Kwài. Fán Kwài said, "How is today's business going?" Lyáng said, "Very critical. Just now Syàng Jwāng has drawn his sword and is dancing, with his intention constantly fixed on the Prince of Pèi." Kwài said, "The time has come." He girt on his sword, took up his shield, and entered the camp gate. The guards with crossed halberds tried to stop him from entering, but Fán Kwài turned his shield sideways and with it knocked them to the ground.

So Lyóu Bāng retreated from the strategically vital Land Within the Passes, and proceeded instead to Hàn, the modest fief awarded him by the King of Chǔ. He seemed to have lost; his rival had occupied the key area. But gradually, one man at a time, Lyóu Bāng coaxed away the most able of Syàng Yǔ's generals. He could see the political future, there on the far side of the military matter. And by persuasion and not generalship, he also gained the *military* upper hand.

We join Syàng Yǔ at the point where he has been outmaneuvered and is surrounded by Lyóu Bāng's forces. He tries at least to escape with his army:

SJ 7. King Syàng made a fortified camp at Gāi-syà. His troops were few, his food gone, and the Hàn armies and the soldiers of the several Lords had surrounded him several lines deep. In the night, from the Hàn camps on all four sides, he heard songs of Chǔ. King Syàng was greatly startled, and said "Has Hàn already gained all of Chǔ? How many Chǔ men they have!" King Syàng then got up in the night, and drank within his tent. He had a beautiful woman named Yǔ whom he always favored and took along with him, and a fine horse named Dapple which he always rode. King Syàng now sang a sad air of heroic melancholy, and himself made a poem for it:

*My strength tore up the mountains, ah; the age I overtopped,
The times give no advantage, ah; Dapple's hoofs are stopped;
Dapple's hoofs are stopped, ah; what still can I do?
w, ah; Yǔ, ah; how can I lose you too?*

He sang it several times, and the beautiful woman echoed it. King Syàng's tears ran down in several streams. His attendants to left and right wept too; not one of them could bear to raise his head to watch.

King Syàng then mounted his horse and rode forth. The stout officers and their mounted followers under his banner were eight hundred some men. While it was still night, they broke through the encirclement and galloped south. At dawn, the Hàn armies realized what had happened, and ordered the cavalry commander Gwàn Yīng to pursue them with five thousand riders. King Syàng crossed the Hwái; those who were able to keep up with him were only a hundred some men. When King Syàng reached Yin-líng he became confused and lost his way. He asked a farmer, but the farmer deceived him, saying “Go left.” He went left, and immediately stumbled into a marsh. For this reason, the Hàn pursuing force caught up with him. King Syàng again led his troops to the east. When he reached Dūng-chǔng, he had only twenty-eight riders left; the Hàn pursuing cavalry numbered several thousand.

King Syàng realized that he could not get away. He said to his riders “It is eight years from the time when I first raised troops until today. I have in person fought more than seventy battles. All who stood against me I destroyed; all I attacked submitted. I was never defeated, and in the end, as Hegemon, I possessed the world. But now at last I find myself hemmed in here. This is Heaven destroying me; it is no fault of mine in battle.

Today I am resolved to die, but I should like to make a sally for you gentlemen and win three victories. For you gentlemen, I shall break through the encirclement, behead a commander, and cut down a flag, so that you gentlemen will know that it is Heaven destroying me, and not any fault of mine in battle.”

He then divided his riders into four companies, facing four ways, and the Hàn army surrounded them several layers deep. King Syàng said to his riders “I will now get one of their commanders for you.” He ordered the riders facing in four directions to ride down, planning to form again in three companies east of the mountain. Then King Syàng gave a great shout and rode down, and the Hàn troops broke in confusion; he did in the end behead one Hàn commander.

The Lord of Chǐ-chywǎn led the cavalry in pursuit of King Syàng. King Syàng glared and shouted at him. The Lord’s men and horses were startled, and gave way for several leagues. His riders reformed in three groups. The Hàn army did not know which group King Syàng was in. The Hàn army divided its troops into three, and again surrounded their opponents. King Syàng rode forth, beheaded an Inspector-General of the Hàn army, killed several tens or a hundred men, and again assembled his riders: he had lost only two men. He then said to his riders “How was that?”

His riders did homage, saying, “It is as the Great King had said.”

King Syàng now thought to cross the Wū River on the east. The Wū River station chief was waiting with a ferry boat. He said to King Syàng “Though the land east of the river is small, its area is still a thousand leagues, with several tens of myriads of people: it too is worth ruling. I beg the Great King to quickly cross. Only your subject has a boat; when the Hàn army arrives, it will have no way to cross”. King Syàng laughed and said “Heaven is destroying me; what use is there in crossing over? Moreover, years ago, with eight thousand youths from east of the river, Ji crossed over and headed west; now I return without one man. Even if the fathers and brothers east of the river pitied me and made me king, how could I face them? Even if they did not speak of it, would not Ji be ashamed in his heart?”

He then said to the station chief, "I see Your Excellency is a worthy man. I have ridden this horse five years; in all who faced him there was not his equal; he once went a thousand leagues in one day. I cannot bear to kill him; I make Your Excellency a present of him."

He then had his riders dismount and go on foot, carrying short swords. When they joined battle, he alone killed several hundred of the Hàn army. King Syàng bore on his body more than ten wounds; he turned and saw the Hàn cavalry marshal Lǚ Mǎ-túng, and said "Are you not my old friend?" Mǎ-túng turned toward him, and gestured to Wáng Yì, saying "This is King Syàng". King Syàng then said "I hear that Hàn has put a price on my head: a thousand gold and a city of a myriad households. I will do you the favor." He then cut his own throat and died. Wáng Yì took his head, and other riders trampled on each other contending for King Syàng; several tens were killed in the ensuing scuffle. When it was over, Rider of the Guard Yáng Syǐ, Cavalry Marshal Lǚ Mǎ-túng, and Guardsmen Lǚ Shǔng and Yáng Wǔ, had each gotten one limb. When the five put the body together, the parts fitted.

And so they divided the prize territory into five fiefs.

And Lyóu Bāng, now Gāu-dzǔ, returns in triumph to his old home, Pèi:

SJ 8. Gāu-dzǔ, on his way back, passed by Pèi, and paused there. He set out wine in the Palace of Pèi, and himself made this song:

The Great Wind has arisen, ah,
the clouds before it flee;
As I return, I've overawed, ah
All Within the Sea.
Where can I find bold officers, ah
to give security?

He had some children practice until they could sing it. Gāu-dzǔ himself arose and danced it; he was greatly moved, and his tears flowed down in streams. He said to the elders of Pèi, "The wanderer longs for his old home. Though I now dwell within the Passes, and though it be a myriad years, my soul will always think with pleasure of Pèi. As Prince of Pèi, I went forth to bring to justice the cruel and perverse; in the end, I came to possess the world. I would make Pèi my bath-town: in gratitude to its people: from generation to generation, no taxes shall be required of them." The elders of Pèi, the women, and his friends, celebrated all that day, with great rejoicing . . .

After more than ten days, Gāu-dzǔ made to depart. The elders of Pèi tried to detain Gāu-dzǔ, but he said, "My people are many, and the elders cannot provide for them." He thereupon departed. Pèi and all the district all went to the western edge of town; Gāu-dzǔ stayed to drink for another three days. The elders of Pèi all bowed their heads and said, "Pèi has been fortunate in this return, but to Fvng you have not returned. Let Your Highness take pity on it." Gāu-dzǔ said, Fvng is where I was born and grew up; it least of all could I forget. It is only that I recall how under Yūng Chǐ it rebelled against me, and went over to Ngwèi." The Elders of Pèi urgently besought him, and he made the same arrangement for it as for Pèi, and he made Lyóu Pì, the Lord of Pèi, to be King of Wú.

He has won. That side of the question has been answered.

Chǔ

But what of the vanquished? The fallen soldiers of Chǔ were honored by Chǔ itself, in a memorial hymn sung at a service held for the departed, complete with its closing benediction, as the service comes to an end.

Once upon a time, Chǔ had aspired to conquer the north. What about all the northern gods? Would they be replaced by the Chǔ god, the Tàì-yī 太一 or “Supreme Unity?” Nothing of the kind. Tàì-yī would still be the god of the Chǔ part of the new empire, but the rest would retain their own local gods. Thus were composed a set of Nine Songs.

To those nine songs there were now added two more. Here they are.

They are distinctive; this is southern poetry. The meter is 3 + “ah” + a one-syllable pause. This is metrically equal to the 4 + 3 + pause of northern poetry, but the “ah” suggests the breathing of the shamanic invocator of the spirits, who figures in much of Chǔ poetry.

The Service To the Souls

Spears of Wú we grasp, ah; armor of hide we wear,
 Wheel-hubs clash below, ah; sword thrusts fill the air;
 Pennons hide the sun, ah; like clouds the foemen swarm,
 Crisscross fall the arrows, ah; ahead our captains storm.
 Our lines are overwhelmed, ah; our ranks are put to flight,
 A dead horse falls on the left, ah; and a wounded one on the right;
 Axles twain are tangled, ah; turn the team around,
 Seize the jaden drumsticks, ah; let the signal sound!
 Heaven's times smile not, ah; the gods are of angry mind,
 The fearful slaughter done, ah; we leave the field behind;
 They never shall return, ah; forever they are gone,
 The level plain is distant, ah; the road runs on and on;
 Swords yet girt about them, ah; their longbows firm they hold
 Head and body severed, ah; but still their hearts are bold.
*Brave you were indeed, ah; and in battle skilled,
 Valiant to the end, ah; your fearless blood you shed;
 Though perished be your bodies, ah; your spirits still strike dread -
 Your immortal souls, ah; are heroes among the dead.*

The service ends, ah; in a flourish of drum
 The dancers' fronds, ah; are held at plumb
 The maidens' voices, ah; now softly hum
 The fragrant orchid, ah; the chrysanthemum,
 Through endless ages, ah; of time to come

The south has, if not quite an epic, at least its moments of martial grandeur.

And now we return to Gāu-dzǔ's dilemma. He has won; the realm is his. But how can it be made secure? The answer does not lie in more warfare.