

## *Epilegomena*

And now on watch I wait the torch's token,  
the glow of fire shall bring from Troia message  
and news of capture.

– *Aeschylus: Agamemnon 8-10 (tr Browning)*

We have seen how a repertoire of Trojan War performance units was transformed by Homer into a more personalized tale of one warrior (the Menis); how some later hand or hands gave that tale a peaceful conclusion (our Iliad); and how that in turn was counterparted by a new work based on the theme of reconciliation (the Odyssey). A unifying national legend had been transmuted into something like a civic celebration. Such was the sequence of things within the tradition itself. But what that tradition chiefly led to was the drama.

Those who know only Greece may suppose that it is in the nature of things that epic (a verse recitation by a solo singer) is the first form of literature, and that its next phase is drama. This requires modification. The self-accompanied recitation is a literary form that can exist under any non-urban conditions, as well in the tents of those who follow their flocks in Inner Asia as with the Dark Age Greeks, living in the ruins of a former civilization. Such forms may indeed lead to drama, which is merely a solo recitation with its parts distributed among real actors, supported by a paying public. In China, this occurred not early, but late: in the Mongol period, when the solo recitation was borrowed from its Inner Asian form, and quickly gave rise to the staged drama – at first with one singing role,<sup>1</sup> and then, as the thing caught on, with all parts sung.

As for the *earliness* of epic, what do we mean by “epic?” In common usage, we mean something of large scale, with a high, not a pedestrian, theme. As with the Mahābhārata, this often takes a military form. And why? Because war is what unifies, and sacrifice is what ennobles. American soldiers who landed on Okinawa in 1945 were appalled at the mass suicides of the civilian population, who cast themselves and their children into the sea, rather than accept capture. What state of mind made this possible? For that, we have first-hand testimony, not only about the adults, but also about the children:

*Girls also fantasized about dying in battle and being immortalized with other war heroes at Yasukuni Shrine in mainland Japan. “Give your life for the sake of the Emperor, wherever you may go,” the girls in their bobbed haircuts and pigtails, sang.<sup>2</sup>*

The Emperor is the symbol of state; his ancestry goes back to the age of myth. To die for the Emperor is to become a living part of that myth.

<sup>1</sup>For the four-act form of the earliest such plays, see Brooks **Aria**.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson **Night** 79.

If we now return to the question of epic, must we say that China had no epic until it encountered accompanied recitation in the 13th century, itself dealing with love and other not very noble topics, and made of it a drama which also tended to dwell on the personal rather than the national?

That will not quite do it. We need something earlier; something based in real life and given a powerful literary form. Not just a fact, not just a feeling, but a heritage to inspire those who come later. And most likely, about war.

Of war there was no lack in classical China. Here is one early song, supposedly from the state of Chín, in which an enthusiastic recruit gives a hand to a less well provided but equally dedicated companion:

That you've no clothes, how can you say?  
With you I'll share my robes so long.  
The King is raising troops today,  
and I've made ready a spearshaft strong;  
together we will march along

That you've no clothes, how can you say?  
With you I'll share my shirts so fine.  
The King is raising troops today,  
and I've made sharp my halberd-tine:  
together we will form the line.

That you've no clothes, how can you say?  
To you a woven kilt I'll yield.  
The King is raising troops today,  
and I've made ready my leathern shield:  
together we will take the field

But these were merely the wars of one state against another. Of those states, Chín briefly succeeded in unifying the other states; creating an Empire. But Chín soon fell apart again. There ensued a long struggle between Chǔ and Hàn, to succeed the Chín Dynasty. And here at last we have something of epic scope: the historical panorama, the defining effort. It opposes two leaders of almost opposite character: the old-style noble warrior Syàng Yǔ, on the Chǔ side, and that cunning nobody, Lyóu Bāng, on his own side.

That story was written in the "Chronicle of Chǔ and Hàn" (楚漢春秋). The text itself is lost, but has been largely incorporated within the Shǐ Jì. Here are two extracts from its last pages.

First, the final aristeia and death of Syàng Yǔ, including a touching farewell to his lady love, from whom he is parted not by petty intrigue, but by war itself.

Second, the return of the victorious Lyóu Bāng in triumph to his home town, Emperor of a still unstable world, and seeking to make that success last.

These are extracts from the Shǐ Jì, where the rest of the story, insofar as it has been preserved, will be found – of course, as rewritten by the Shǐ Jì compiler, Szmǎ Tán, part of the defining myth of the Hàn dynasty itself.

## The End of Syàng Yǔ

– Shǐ Jì 7, extract, c0100

*Yes, there is great glory in victory, but there may also be high nobility in defeat. If this piece were in Greek, it would be called the aristeia of Syàng Yǔ. Here end a long series of battles between generals fighting under the Chǔ banner, and those of Hàn. Syàng Yǔ, from a noble Chǔ family, was the leading figure on the Chǔ side. His opponent, Lyóu Bāng, a northerner, the holder of the “Hàn” fief given him by the Chǔ King, would later establish Hàn as successor to Chín. Lyóu Bāng was no general, but he had the gift of attracting the service of generals who had defected from Chǔ. Gradually, his forces grew larger than those under Syàng Yǔ.*

*Besieged by the Hàn forces, Syàng Yǔ is reduced to mere scraps of army. With victory unattainable, we find him in his tent: high-hearted and indomitable. Soon he will ride forth to perish in unequal combat. The Chǔ song which he improvises, and in which his lady joins him, is remembered as the “Song of Gāi-syà.” The exploits with which he seeks to convince his followers that fate, not any fault of his, is responsible for his failure, were meant by the narrator as ironic – the Chinese theory of rulership favors shrewd delegation over any merely personal prowess. But in scorning the offer of a lesser realm in the east, Syàng Yǔ gains for himself the sympathy, and the applause, of posterity.*

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 Yú 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?  
Yú, ah; Yú, 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.

*The emotional cost of heroism to the hero himself is here given scope and attention, and the lady herself feels it too. All the human poignancy of it.*

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 Yīn-líng he became confused and lost his way. He asked a farmer, but the farmer deceived him, saying “Go left.” He went left, and at once stumbled into a marsh. For this reason, the Hàn pursuing force caught up with him. King Syàng again led his troops eastward. When he reached Dūng-chǐng, 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 arms. 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 arms.” 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 forth, 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 Chì-chywǎn led the cavalry forth 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, and 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 once more 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 him homage, saying, “It is as the Great King had said.”

*The hero’s last promise to his followers has been kept.*

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, Knight of the Guard Yáng Syǐ, Cavalry Marshal Lǚ Mǎ-túng, and Guardsmen Lǚ Shvng and Yáng Wǔ, had each gotten one of his limbs. When the five put the body together again, the parts fitted.

And so they divided the prize territory into five fiefs.

*In the bloodiest of ways, the landholding is divided among the contenders. As for Syàng Yǚ's suicide is the honorable way, as even Achilles accepts. Death is the price of a certain kind of immortality. Syàng Yǚ's noble death, and his noble refusal to accept from the boatman a lesser success, inspired many in later centuries. And the commoner soldiers who fell in the Chǔ cause? Thy too were enshrined, in this Chǔ prayer to their souls:*

*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*

## Returning to Pèi

– *Shǐ Jì 8, extract, c0100*

*The world has been won; a rebel has been put to flight. Lyóu Bāng returns to his new stronghold, the former capital of Chín. On the way, a poem is made.*

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 arises, 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 it security?

He had some children practice until they could sing it. Gāudzǔ himself arose and danced it; he was greatly moved, and his tears flowed down in several 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. He spoke with his friends, and laughed, and made merry.

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 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 made Lyóu Pì, the Lord of Pèi, to be King of Wú.

*The end is not the death of the rival, but the return of the hero. Lyóu Bāng is back home, after many hairbreadth perils and wily subterfuges. What was envisioned as the final success of Odysseus, the freedom from the sea foretold in Odyssey 23, is here before us in the person of Lyóu Bāng.*

*With war, he is done at last, And now, the Emperor of the World takes steps to safeguard what has been won.*

*Conflict is what unifies a society – but only durably so if it ends in amity. Is this not what the Odyssey was telling us, in the last lines of Book 24?*