

*Shǐ Jì†

Acquiring a Base in Pèi (SJ 7)

Chín Shǐ, who had seized power in Chín, was recognized as King of Chín by Chǔ. Lyóu Bāng sought a similar base in Pèi. The people were at first willing to kill their Chín magistrate and welcome Lyóu Bāng (here, Lyóu Jì), but later think better of it, and bar the gate against him. A quibble ensues. Lyóu Jì refuses the title “Director” (implying office under Chín), and demands “Prince” (the ruler of an independent state). Chín is abandoned, and the town is formally in revolt.

The Yellow Emperor was the chief directional god; Chǐ Yóu, the God of War.

Lyóu Jì then wrote a document on silk and shot it over the wall, saying to the fathers and elders of Pèi, “The world has long suffered under Chín. Though fathers and elders hold the city for the Director of Pèi, the Lords have risen, and they will slaughter all in Pèi. If all in Pèi kill the Director, and choose someone capable as Director, and so respond to the Lords, then your homes will be preserved. If not, fathers and sons alike will be slaughtered, without recourse.”

Fathers and elders then led the young men, and together killed the Director of Pèi; they opened the city gate to welcome Lyóu Jì, thinking to make him Director of Pèi. Lyóu Jì said, “The world is now in turmoil; the Lords have arisen. If you select one who is incapable, then at one defeat, your blood will soak the ground. It is not that I dare think of myself, but I fear my ability is slight, and I will be unable to preserve fathers and brothers. In this great affair, I would ask that you again take thought for one who will do.” Syāu and Tsáu and the rest were civil officials, they were concerned for themselves, and feared that the enterprise might fail, and Chín would wipe out their families. They all yielded to Lyóu Jì. Fathers and elders said, “We have long heard of the wonders concerning Lyóu Jì; he is sure to be honored; moreover, when we divine for it, no auspice is as favorable as that of Lyóu Jì.” At this, Lyóu Jì several times declined, but none dared to accept, and so they set up Jì as Prince of Pèi.

He sacrificed to the Yellow Emperor, and also made offerings to Chǐ Yóu, in the courtyard of Pèi. He smeared the blood on his drums. His banners were red, from the time when he killed the snake, the God of White, and the killer, the God of Red.

Thus did he honor the color red.

The Feast at Húng-mǎn (SJ 7)

Years have passed. Of the generals fighting for King Hwái of Chǔ, Lyóu Bāng, the “Prince of Pèi” has reached the Chín capital area ahead of his rival, the Chǔ nobleman Syàng Yǔ. He threatens to found the successor dynasty to Chín. Tsáu Wú-shāng alerts Syàng Yǔ to Lyóu Bāng’s ambitions. Syàng Yǔ breaks in with his army. On strategist Jāng Lyáng’s advice, Lyóu Bāng apologizes; a feast is held to confirm their amity. Syàng Yǔ’s general Fàn Dzǎng (Yà-fǔ), 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 gain his own place in history. The banquet is a confrontation between new ambitious guile and old heroic reluctance, with the Empire of the World as the prize.

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 Dzǎng 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 Dzǎng 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 girded on his sword, took up his shield, and entered the camp gate. The guards with crossed halberds tried to stop him from entering. Fán Kwài turned his shield sideways and with it knocked them to the ground.

Fán Kwài then entered. He plucked aside the curtain, and stood facing west; with glaring eye he looked at King Syàng. The hair of his head stood up, his eyeballs bulged. King Syàng gripped his sword and rose to one knee, saying, "Who is our guest?" Jāng Lyáng said, "The Prince of Pèi's driver, Fán Kwài." King Syàng said, "A stout fellow. I present him with a beaker of wine." They gave him a *gallon* beaker of wine. Kwài bowed his thanks, got up, and drank it standing. King Syàng said, "I present him with a pork shoulder." They gave him a *raw* pork shoulder. Fán Kwài laid his shield on the ground, put the shoulder on it, drew his sword, cut off slices, and gulped them down. King Syàng said, "A stout fellow. Can he drink more?" Fán Kwài said, "Your subject would not shrink from death; how is a beaker of *wine* worth declining?"

"Now, the King of Chín had the heart of a tiger or wolf. He killed men as if he feared he could not get enough; he punished men as if he feared he would never be done, and all the world turned against him. King Hwái covenanted with the generals: "He who first defeats Chín and enters Syén-yáng, shall be king over it." Now, the Prince of Pèi has first defeated Chín and entered Syén-yáng. Not a thing has he dared to touch; he has sealed the treasuries and withdrawn his army to Bà-shàng, to await the Great King's coming. His sending generals to guard the Pass was to prevent brigands coming and going, or creating disturbances. And for all his hard toil and high merit, he has had no reward of being enfeoffed as a lord; instead, hearkening to petty slander, they wish to kill a man of worth. This would continue the outrages of vanished Chín. I would venture, on the King's behalf, not to take this course." King Syàng had nothing to answer. He said, "Sit down." Fán Kwài sat down by Lyáng. After a while, the Prince of Pèi got up to go to the privy, and motioned Fán Kwài to come out. After the Prince of Pèi had left, King Syàng had Inspector General Chín Píng summon him. The Prince of Pèi said, "We have gone without taking leave; what is to be done?" Fán Kwài said, "Great deeds turn not aside for petty precautions; great rituals wait not on little courtesies. They are the knife and platter, we are the fish and meat. What would be the point in taking our leave?"

Then he left, having Jāng Lyáng stay behind to make apologies. Lyáng asked, "What did the Great King bring with him?" He said, "I have a pair of whistone discs which I wanted to offer to King Syàng, and a pair of jade dippers which I wanted to give to Yà-fū. When he became angry, I dared not offer them. Do Your Excellency offer them for me." Jāng Lyáng said, "I shall take care to do so."

At this time, King Syàng's camp was below Húng-mǐn; the Prince of Pèi's camp was at Bà-shàng, forty leagues away. The Prince of Pèi therefore left behind carriages and outriders, and rode off alone, with Fán Kwài, Syàhóu Yīng, Jīn Chyáng, and Jì Syìn following on foot with sword and shield, along the road below Lí-shān and through Jǐ-yáng. The Prince of Pèi said to Jāng Lyáng, "By this road, it is no more than twenty leagues to our camp. When you estimate that I have reached camp, do Your Excellency then go in." When the Prince of Pèi had had time to reach his camp by the shortcut, Jāng Lyáng went in and made apology, saying "The Prince of Pèi could "cope with cup and ladle," and so was unable to take his leave. He has expressly charged your subject Lyáng to offer up this pair of whitestone discs, which, bowing twice, he bestows at the feet of the Great King, and this pair of jade dippers, which, bowing twice, he offers at the feet of the General." King Syàng said, "Where is the Prince of Pèi?" Lyáng said, "He heard that the Great King meant to charge him with his errors; he left alone and has by now reached his camp." King Syàng then received the discs and put them by his seat. But Yà-fǔ received the jade dippers, put them on the ground, drew his sword, and smashed them with a blow, saying, "Yàh! Mere children are not worth laying plans with! The one who snatches away King Syàng's empire will be this same Prince of Pèi! All of us have this day become his prisoners."

When the Prince of Pèi reached camp, he at once executed Tsáu Wú-shāng. After several days, Syàng Yǚ led his troops west and put Syén-yáng to the sword; he killed the surrendered Chín king Dž-yīng and set alight the Chín palaces. The fire did not die down for three months. He gathered in the valuables and women, and went east. Someone said to King Syàng, "The land within the Passes is protected on four sides by mountains and rivers; the land is rich and fertile; one might make a capital there to become a Hegemon." But King Syàng saw that the Chín palaces were all burnt to ruins, and in his heart he cherished the wish to go back east. He said, "To be rich and honored and not to go back home, is like wearing brocade and walking at night – who would know it?" The advisor said, "People say that the Chǔ people are just monkeys, washed and with hats on; after all, it's true."

King Syàng heard of it, and boiled the advisor alive.

*Shǐ Jì+ (c0100)

The End of Syàng Yǔ (SJ 7)

Somewhere in here, we realize that we are listening to China's great epic. Some epics are in hexameters, sung to a lyre. Others are in long prose narratives like this one, which tell of the glory of victory, or, as here, the high nobility of defeat. If this piece were in Greek, it would be called the aristeia of Syàng Yǔ. Here are concluded the battles between generals fighting under the Chǔ banner. Syàng Yǔ, from an old Chǔ family, was on the Chǔ side. His opponent Lyóu Bāng, a northerner and the holder of the Hàn fief granted 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, some of whom had defected from Chǔ. Gradually, his forces grew larger than those commanded by Syàng Yǔ.

This piece was at first part of a Chronicle of Chǔ and Hàn. It was later taken into the Shǐ Jì, and in that classic form, it is alluded to in many later poems.

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 by posterity as the "Song of Gāi-syà." The exploits with which he seeks to convince his followers that fate, not any fault of his own, is responsible for his failure, were meant by the narrator as ironic – the Chinese theory of rulership favors shrewd delegation over personal prowess. But in proudly scorning the offer of a lesser eastern realm. Syàng Yǔ gains for himself the sympathy, and the applause (p393), 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 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?
Yǔ, 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 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 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 Chì-chywán 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, 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 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 Shòng and Yáng Wǔ, had each gotten one of his limbs;. When the five put the body together, the parts fitted.

And so they divided the prize territory into five fiefs.

Lyóu Bāng

Returning to Pèi (SJ 8)

The world has been won; a rebel has been put to flight. Leaving it to another commander to dispose of him, Gāu-dzǔ returns to his stronghold, the former capital of Chín, “The Land Within the Passes.” On the way, a poem gets 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 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 Fǜng you have not returned; let Your Highness take pity on it.” Gāu-dzǔ said, Fǜng 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.