

The Interaction Between Liu Bang and the Group of Generals

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ABSTRACT

According to the research of Li Kaiyuan, the foundation of the regime in the early Western Han Dynasty was the class named Military Meritocracy, but there were various groups and clans existing in this huge class, and the most influential group was the group of generals. The members of this group were military officers who had merit of attacking cities and seizing territory. Faced with this powerful group, Liu Bang's imperial power was unable to exercise at will. In order to consolidate his power and maintain the Liu family's rule of the empire, on the one hand, Liu Bang employed Chen Ping to monitor the generals; on the other hand, he transferred Cao Shen, the leader of the group, from the central government to the province. In addition, Liu Bang also took Zhou Bo around to fight and suppress the rebellions. In a series of wars, the more Zhou Bo's merit gradually increased, the more his influence in the army improved. In the end, Zhou Bo took the position of Defender-in-chief and cultivated a force faithful to Liu family in the army. It was Zhou Bo who finally settled the ownership of the empire of the Liu family.

Keywords: Han Dynasty, political history, Liu Bang, group of generals, Cao Can, Zhou Bo, Chen Pin

1. INTRODUCTION

In many studies of the political history of the early Han Dynasty, Li Kaiyuan's *The Establishment of the Han Empire and the group of Liu Bang: Studies on the Military Meritocracy* is a classic that cannot be avoided. This book stands on the basis of previous studies and proposes a new hypothesis: the social foundation of the regime in the early years of the Western Han Dynasty was a newly emerged Military Meritocracy. Military Meritocracy was a political group and a social class which was transformed from political and military group of Liu Bang. The main members of Military Meritocracy were the officers and bureaucrats of the Liu Bang's group and their families [1]. Based on this, Li Kaiyuan points out that Liu Bang, as the person with the greatest military merit, shared the power to rule China with other military merit holders. Therefore, the imperial power of Liu Bang was not the absolute authoritarian imperial power of the First Emperor of Qing, but a new type of relative limited imperial power [2].

Li Kaiyuan's research has a broad horizon and uses statistical methods to classify historical figures into different strata or groups. His analysis of the central political landscape in the early Han Dynasty also inherits this style, dividing the officials in the central government into groups one by one according to their ancestral homes [3]. However, it is easy to cover up some existing particularities. For example, although it was true that Zhou Bo, Xiao He, and Cao Shen were included in the Primary Group of Feng Pei for the two indicators of ancestral homes and joining time [4]. However, this kind of

classification obviously ignores the differences between these three people. For example, Cao Shen stayed away from the imperial court after Liu Bang was enthroned as the emperor, and Zhou Bo accompanied Liu Bang for a long time. This was an important difference, but it was hidden in the classification of the Primary Group of Feng Pei.

In addition, Li Kaiyuan attaches importance to structural analysis, but ignores the activities of specific individuals in history. Li Kaiyuan points out that Liu Bang's imperial power was limited. But Li Kaiyuan does not continue analyzing whether Liu Bang had expanded the power under the condition of limited power, if so, how to expand. For another example, Li Kaiyuan attributes Chen Ping's switch to Empress Lü only to Chen Ping's personal qualities. This conclusion obviously lacks sufficient analysis [5].

Based on the above analysis, this article intends to take Li's perspective and continue to focus on the group differentiation in the political landscape in the early Han Dynasty. This article acknowledges that Military Meritocracy was an important and pervasive class in early Western Han Dynasty, which included almost all historical figures recorded in *Records of the Grand Historian* and *Book of Han*. Furthermore, there were different political groups incompatible with each other. For example, although both Xiao He and Cao Can were members of Military Meritocracy, Cao Can was also a member of the group of generals, but Xiao He was not.

Unlike the research of Li Kaiyuan, this article looks on the interaction of the three parties, the emperor, the generals' group, and the characters who were not part of the generals' group. This article will focus on analyzing a few

special political figures—Liu Bang, Cheng Ping, Cao Can and Zhou Bo—and tries to analyze the activities of them from the three dimensions of context, motivation and result. Therefore, this article will appear more microscopic, tending to draw out the big political situation from individual key figures.

2. POLITICAL POWER OF THE “GROUP OF GENERALS”

In the early Western Han Dynasty, there was a political force with great influence, that was, the “generals”, that were people who had achievements in the army. These generals were the most powerful members of Military Meritocracy and often appeared collectively in historical records. For example, in the second year of Han Dynasty, Liu Bang “appointed his Defender-in-chief, Han Xin, as King of Han. Among his generals, all those who had defeated ten thousand troops or occupied a province has ten thousand families, were enfeoffed with ten thousand households.” [6] For another example, Liu Bang once said at a banquet: “My Grandees of First Order and generals, I ask everyone to speak up frankly and don’t try to hide anything from me. Why did I win the ownership of world, but Xiang Yü lost it?” [7] The best material to reflect the fact that the generals existed as an influential political group is a piece of historical record after the death of Liu Bang:

In fourth month, Liu Bang died in Changle Palace. After four days, no news of his death was announced. Empress Lü consulted with Shen Yiji and she said: “The other generals, like the emperor himself, stood out from the common people. At present, they face north and admit that they are subjects of Emperor Gaozu, but they have always been full of dissatisfaction in their hearts. Now they will be asked to serve a young master. I worry that if they and their families are not completely eliminated, the empire will not be peaceful.” [8]

The members of group of generals either followed the uprising of Liu Bang or joined in the process of battle of obtaining the ownership of the world with Xiang Yü. All of them gained military merit in the war, and at the same time helped Liu Bang to win the world. The identity of this group was based on military merit, to be precise, the merit of fighting in the field and seizing territory [9]. Xiao He and Chen Ping did not have this kind of merit, so in the opinion of the generals at that time, these two people and themselves were not in the same group. There were many members of this group, although only a handful of prestigious people had been recorded in *Records of the Grand Historian* and *Book of Han*, the huge influence and political power of this group can be seen from the following historical records:

The sixth year: The emperor had already enfeoffed over twenty of his ministers who had achieved signal distinction, but the rest of his followers argued day and night over who had own greater merit so that no further enfeoffments could carried out. When the emperor was

residing at the Southern Palace in Loyang, he looked down one day from a covered walk and saw his followers walking restlessly about the courtyard and sitting on the ground talking together. “What are they talking about?” he asked Zhang Liang.

“You Majesty does not know?” said Zhang Liang. “They are plotting a revolt.”

...

“What should I do?” asked the emperor in consternation.

“Among the men you dislike, and all your followers know you dislike, whom do you hate the most?”

“Yong Chi and I are ancient enemies,” replied the emperor.

“Many times in the past he has brought me trouble and shame. I would like to have killed him, but because his merit is great I have not had the heart.”

“You must hurry and enfeoff Yong Chi before anyone else and make known what you have done to your other followers. When they see that Yong Chi has been enfeoffed, they will all feel assured of their own rewards,” said Zhang Liang. [10]

If we focus our attention on the political event of Liu Bang attempting to change the heir apparent, we will have a better understanding of the political influence of the generals. The scramble for the position of heir apparent was a mirror of the central political pattern in the early Western Han Dynasty, at the same time, this event also greatly affected the political landscape.

There were many reasons why Liu Bang wanted to change the heir apparent. First, Lady Qi was young and beautiful, often serving around, and loved by Liu Bang. Furthermore, the replacement of the heir apparent was an exercise of imperial power by Liu Bang against the military power group and Lü family—Lü family were also members of the group of generals. The relationship between Lü family and generals can be seen from the following records:

When the banquet was at height, Tian Sheng (田生) asked the waiters to leave the room, and persuaded Zhang Qing (張卿) to say: “I have seen more than a hundred residences of the princes and vassal kings. They were all won outstanding merit during the time of Gaozu. Lü family assisted Gao Zu to win ownership of the world. Lü family’s credit is the greatest. At the same time, Empress Dowager Lü, wife of Gaozu, as a member of Lü family, has a high status...” [11]

Empress Lü’s character is strong and decisive. She assisted Gaozu to conquer the world and helped Gaozu kill many ministers. She has two older brothers, both of whom were generals. [12]

It can be seen that the Lü family was a part of the group of generals, and its special feature was only the marriage with the emperor. So, once Liu Bang wanted to hand over the position of heir apparent to the son of Lady Qi instead of the son of Empress Lü, the first thing Lü family thought about was asking the generals for help. Although, there were not many records about this matter in the *Records of the Grand Historian*. From this book we can only see that Zhang Liang and Shu Suntong helped Lü family. But from the following materials, we can see the role played by the generals as a group in this matter:

Zhang Liang persuaded Liu Bang to designate the heir as general to lead the army in Guanzhong (關中) area. [13]

The four gentlemen toasted their blessings to emperor and walked away. The Emperor watched them and summoned Lady Qi to his side, pointed to the four men to show her, saying, “I want to change the heir apparent, but those four men assist him. The heir's wings have been formed and it is difficult to threaten his position. Empress Lü is your real master!” Lady Qi wept, and the emperor said, “If you dance for me, and I will sing a song for you,” and he sang: The swan soars and flutters its wings.

His wings are ready,

So, he soars all over the world.

Soaring all over the world—

What can we do?

Although we have short arrows,

Where to apply! [14]

Zhang Liang's proposal showed two intentions. First, he wanted the heir apparent to have real power. Second, he wanted to strengthen the relationship between the heir apparent and the army. As the son of Empress Lü whose family were members of generals' group, taking office in the army could help him draw on the political influence of the generals.

The second piece of material cannot explain directly why Liu Bang gave up all hope of changing heir apparent, because how could Liu Bang dispel the idea just because of the four old men? If we understand the metaphor in this material, we will find the truth: The presence of generals and their support for the heir apparent and Lü family forced Liu Bang to give up his attempt. The “wings of swan” actually referred to the group of generals. The last sentence of the song expressed Liu Bang's helplessness—the group of generals had enormous political power even emperor couldn't overwhelm them. Above all, the reason of Emperor Hui and Empress Lü obtaining the control of the empire was getting support from the generals. Meanwhile, during the reign of Emperor Hui and Empress Lü, the power of the group of generals reached the peak.

3. HOW LIU BANG DELT WITH GENERALS: THE ANALYSIS OF THREE HISTORICAL FIGURES

So, was Liu Bang unprepared for the threat of generals to his power? No. Liu Bang started to limit the growing power of the generals before he had controlled the empire. In addition to the attempt of changing heir apparent mentioned above, the measures Liu Bang had taken for limiting the power of generals and extending his imperial power were mainly three: employing Chen Ping, exiling Cao Ginseng from the central government and cultivating the influence of Zhou Bo in the army.

Chen Ping joined the team of Liu Bang after Liu Bang had conquered Guanzhong and have extended the front to the present Henan province [15]. Chen Ping, who joined in halfway, had no close relationship with the officers and generals who had already joined and had been fighting

with Liu Bang for a long time. At the same time, according to the following records cited from the *Records of the Grand Historian*, we can see that Liu Bang had no intention of cultivating an intimate relationship between Chen Ping and the officers, on the contrary, he wanted Chen Ping to monitor and restrain those outstanding generals:

The generals all clamored and said, “The king (Liu Bang) just got a deserter from the Chu, without knowing anything about his ability, he let him sit beside him in the carriage and even asked him to supervise us who are his seniors!” But when Liu Bang heard these complaints, he even more favored Chen Ping and gave him more honors [16].

The identity of the supervisor and monitor for Chen Ping meant both Liu Bang's trust and the deterioration of the relationship with the generals. The general's defamation of Chen Ping was the best manifestation of the deterioration of the relationship between the two sides. The generals slandered Chen Ping for fornicating with his sister-in-law and taking bribes [17]. This slander finally became a famous Chinese literary quotation termed as “dao-jing-shou-sao.”

Furthermore, the relationship between Chen Ping and Liu Bang was extremely intimate, and even very special. This can be seen from the fact that Chen Ping conspired with Liu Bang every time, and the contents of the conspiracy were not known to outsiders. There is such a record in the *Records of the Grand Historian* about the siege of Baideng:

Emperor Gaozu adopted the strategy proposed by Chen Ping and sent an envoy to Chan Yu's consort. Eventually, the siege was lifted and Gaozu escaped. This strategy was highly confidential, so no one knew its specific content [18].

Huan Tan recorded the views of people about this matter at that time in *Xin Lun*. Some people thought that because this policy was very confidential, no one knew its specific content except Liu Bang and Cheng Ping. Huan Tan opposed this view. He believed that because the content of this strategy was so indecent that people at that time were reluctant to mention it. Therefore, the truth of the matter gradually lost. With a little thought, we can know that the view of Huan Tan was wrong. First of all, Huan Tan's description of the indecent content of this strategy was based solely on his personal speculation without any reliable historical data. Second, according to the following material, we can find that it was normal for Chen Ping and Liu Bang to conspire and the content of the conspiracy was not known to the outsiders:

Chen Ping continued accompanying the emperor as a colonel of guard as before to suppress rebellions of Chen Xi and Qing Bu. He provided six ingenious strategies for Liu Bang. Every time Chen Ping proposed a strategy, Liu Bang would enlarge his enfeoffment, so that his enfeoffment was six times enlarged. Because some of the strategies were kept secretly, no one in the world knows the specific content of them nowadays [19].

In summary, Chen Ping had a close relationship with Liu Bang and was a special existence for Liu Bang. Because

Chen Ping was not a member of the generals' group and even stood on the opposite side, Liu Bang dispatched Chen Ping to the troop at the end of his life to take over the leadership of the troop from Fan Kuai who was a relative of Lü family and a core member of the group of generals and probably plotting a rebellion [20].

In addition, it was precisely this special relationship between Chen Ping and Liu Bang that led Chen Ping not to stay faithful to Liu family after Liu Bang died but to switch to Lü family. On the one hand, the relationship between Chen and Liu was more like a cooperative relationship based on the exchange of interests—Chen Ping offered advice and strategies and Liu Bang gave a big reward [21]. On the other hand, Chen Ping had no clan to rely on, and had long-term bad relationship with generals' cliques, so it was necessary for him to find a backing. At the beginning, this backing was Liu Bang. After Liu Bang died, the only one who could protect Chen Ping from retaliation of the generals' clan and give him benefits was Empress Lü. Because Empress Lü knew Chen Ping's situation, she was able to conclude that Chen Ping was harmless [22]. This explained why Chen Ping, who was previously put in important positions by Liu Bang, got an important post of Chamberlain for Attendants from Empress Lü in a flash [23].

In addition to employing Chen Ping to supervise the military power group externally, Liu Bang also tried to suppress the members of the group to weaken the overall influence of the group of generals. Each group had its leader, because Cao Can's military merit was outstanding [24], and he had great influence in the generals' clan, so he was publicly promoted as the leader. This can be seen from the following material:

Grandees of the First Order were granted their fiefs, and the emperor raised the question of what order of precedence they should take. The generals said: "Cao Can, the Grandee of the First Order Pingyang, has seventy wounds on his body. He has achieved the greatest merit in attacking cities and seizing territory. It should be proper to put him first." [25]

Liu Bang definitely wanted to weaken the political influence of Cao Shen. Initially, Liu Bang wanted to use Xiao He as the first in ranking. Because Xiao He was not a member of the group of generals and had no achievement of attacking cities and seizing territory, Liu Bang's proposal was met with fierce opposition from the generals. However, with the help of E Qianqiu, the intention of Liu Bang was finally realized [26]. In addition, the most important and efficient measure taken by Liu Bang was transferring Cao Can from the power center—imperial court—to Qi Kingdom. In this way, Liu Bang not only separated Cao Shen from his group, but also weakened Cao Shen's influence on the political situation:

Xiang Yu was dead, and the world was settled down. The Han King became the emperor, Han Xin was transferred to the King of Chu, and Qi Kingdom was changed into a county. Cao Can returned the seal of prime minister of the Han court. The Emperor Gao made Liu Fei, the eldest son,

the King of Qi, and appointed Cao Shen as the prime minister of Qi Kingdom [27].

As what has been discussed above, during the reign of Emperor Hui and Empress Lü, the power of the group of generals reached the peak. Cao Can, as the leader of this group, would undoubtedly be promoted to a high position. This was why, after learning the news of the death of Xiao He, Cao Can confidently believed that the position of prime minister must belong to him, and he packed up his clothes and prepares to enter Chang'an as soon as possible. After transferring Cao Can from central government, Liu Bang began to cultivate his own forces within the army to counter the generals' clique. The representative of this force was Zhou Bo. There is a clear record in *Book of Han*: "Zhou Bo was an honest and strong-willed person. Emperor Gaozu believed that he could assign important tasks to him with peace of mind." [28] In addition, Zhou Bo began to gain a pivotal position in politics after Liu Bang became emperor and the most commendable deeds in his life happened in this period:

At first, when Zhou Bo was still a commoner, he was a simple countryman with almost no ability over ordinary people. However, after he assisted Emperor Gaozu to conquer the world, he gained the position of general and minister. When the Lü family planned the rebellion, he rescued the country from danger and returned it to its original path. Even the ancient ministers Yi Yin and Duke Zhou could not have done better! [29]

Liu Bang's cultivation of Zhou Bo and the growth of Zhou Bo's influence were mainly achieved through a series of battles to quell the rebellions of kings of different surnames—Zang Tu, Han Xin, Chen Xi, Lu Wan [30]. Here are a few pieces of material can prove that the forces of Zhou Bo in the army were gradually taking shape:

As a general, he accompanied the Emperor Gaozu to attack and defeat Zang Tu ... The troop under Zhou Bo's command marched into the thick of battle and won outstanding glory. [31]

As a general, he accompanied the Emperor Gaozu to quell and defeat the rebellion of Han Xin ... The troop under Zhou Bo's command marched into the thick of battle and won outstanding glory. Zhou Bo was awarded the position of Defender-in-chief. [32]

The repetition of the sentence that "the troop under Zhou Bo's command marched into the thick of battle and won outstanding glory" means there were an increasing number of soldiers commanded by Zhou Bo. These soldiers had gained merit which could provide them with power and influence in the army. This group of soldiers which were gradually taking shape would be a faithful force for Liu Bang and Zhou Bo to contend with the group of generals in the future. It can be said that with Liu Bang's intentional cultivation, Zhou Bo gradually replaced Cao Can and became a new leader in the army. It was based on this that Liu Bang said the phrase "the person who can stabilize the power of Liu family must be Zhou Bo" [33] before his death.

4. CONCLUSION

Above all, it was during the period after Liu Bang became emperor, military merit of Zhou Bo surged, and correspondingly, Zhou Bo received the position of Defender-in-chief which was the supreme military commander [34]. During this period, the prime minister in the central government was Xiao He, who had no merit of “attacking cities and seizing territory”, and the Defender-in-chief was Zhou Bo, who was cultivated by Liu Bang to take control of the army from the clan of generals and to weaken their political influence. Cao Can, the leader of the groups of generals, is placed outside the power center. During the reign of Emperor Hui and Grand Empress Lü, Zhou Bo held the position of Defender-in-chief for a long time and maintained a strong influence on the army. Although Cao Can had returned to the central government to serve as prime minister at this time, the kings of the same surname—Liu—arranged at the provinces by Liu Bang and Zhou Bo arranged in the central government guarded the regime of Liu family. Later, Cao Can, Emperor Hui and Grand Empress Lü died one after another, and Chen Ping changed his political position again to support Liu family. At that time, although Lü Lu and Lü Chan launched a rebellion, with the efforts of Zhou Bo and Liu Zhang, the rebellion was finally quelled [35]. As Emperor Wen of Han came to Chang’an, the power of the empire was held firmly in the hands of the Liu family once again.

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