

The Mythology of Liu Bang in *Shiji* and Western Han Elites

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ABSTRACT

Previous scholarship has largely regarded Qian's writings to be part of a literary tradition that was popularized for its divination of the ruler's birth, as Qian did in his accounts of many rulers like the founder of the Shang, Zhou, and Qin political lineages. However, these works paid little attention to the particular abundance of mythological elements in Liu Bang's biography, and viewed it as extensional accounts that served to demonstrate the influence of Liu Bang's birth story. This essay argues that it was not only the birth of Liu Bang, but the entire characterization of Liu Bang, that was mythologized by Qian. This essay will further contribute to the academic dialogue by analyzing the context and politico-cultural implications of Qian's Biography of the Gaozu Emperor primarily from the perspective of Han elite culture, a group that has not been given adequate study in regards to the topic of this essay.

Keywords: *Sima Qian, Shiji, Mythology of Liu Bang.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Western Han dynasty Grand Historian Sima Qian presents an peculiar account of the Han dynasty's founding ruler Liu Bang, titled the Gaozu Emperor, in The Biography of the Gaozu Emperor in his *Shiji*. Whereas Confucian virtues and political achievements primarily characterized rulers like Wendi and Wudi who were recorded in subsequent biographies, it was instead the divine qualities of Liu Bang's identity that was foundational to his account. Contrary to the biographies like that of the Wudi Emperor who also were given a divine beginning in Qian's work [1], Liu Bang was not only the son of the prominent deity Chidi who befell his mother with pregnancy in the form of a dragon, his political career was also heavily marked with metaphysical qualities that included the slaying of the offspring of another Chinese deity Baidi, as well as "displaying the aura of the Heaven's Son" when he was not yet emperor [1]. Moreover, Liu Bang's mythological characterization in *Shiji* was also distinct in that it contained multiple facets that did not formulate a solid, unified image. Indeed, he was documented to be associated with a lake spirit, a son of a dragon, and was one of the five main deities of Western Han theology at the same time.

However, it is unclear whether Qian's accounts of Liu Bang as a mythological figure was an original creation, or

whether it was a reinstatement of sources that are largely unavailable for historical study. Nevertheless, Qian's work remains by far the most well preserved source of historical record in the earlier periods of the Western Han dynasty that demonstrates the mythology that circulates around Liu Bang and the elites' involvement and responses to such a mythology. Therefore, *Shiji*'s issue of originality will not be of relevant focus, and will be the primary historical text upon which the present essay elaborates its content; efforts to verify the originality of Qian's accounts would deviate from the focus of the essay.

It is the aim of the present essay to explore how the political and religious culture of Western Han elites under Wudi's rule, for which Qian was writing for and in which he was a member of, contributed to the complex politico-cultural context and implications for Qian's account of Liu Bang. Ideologically, it was neither Confucianism nor Legalism, ever-so popular in Wudi's court [2], that primarily characterized Liu Bang's identity. The different attitude held towards the Gaozu Emperor comes from a religious background within the Han elites that constituted of Han traditions, Taoist influenced theology, and the practices of ancestral worship. Culturally, Qian's works also reflected the thought of the Han elite community for which he was writing for as the court's Gran Historian. On a political level Western Han imperial

legitimacy also found its roots in the mythology of Liu Bang, particularly prevalent in the justification of power.

2. LIU BANG'S MYTHOLOGY AND WESTERN HAN RELIGION

Existing historical and archaeological scholarship on Western Han culture has yielded valuable insight into the development and manifestation of prominent religious ideologies and practices in this period. In particular, investigations into the practices of ancestral worship amongst the Han elite, and studies on the concepts of shen and xian, or "gods" and "celestial beings", provide foundational work with which this section will build upon to trace the relationship between Liu Bang's mythology and Han religious tradition [3-6].

2.1. Western Han elites and ancestral worship

The original subject of ancestral worship in the Western Han dynasty was not the ancient forefathers of familial lineage, as observed so prevalently in the later periods such as the Tang, but in fact the father of Liu Bang himself. Eastern Han historian Ban Gu records in his *The Book of Han* that after the death of Liu Bang's father in 197 B.C. the emperor ordered "all feudal lords to construct the Temple of the Retired Emperor at the imperial capital" [7], setting the precedent for the tradition of ancestral worship in the Western Han dynasty. After Liu Bang's passing in 195 B.C. he himself also became the subject of ancestral worship during the reign of his heir Liu Ying, the Huidi Emperor, where he also ordered "all feudal lords within the prefecture to construct the Temple of the High Emperor" [7]. Subsequent emperors like Jingdi and Xuandi in the Western Han dynasty continued to popularize the tradition of ancestral worship in this manner by constructing temples of the preceding emperor, so that by the time of Sima Qian's work as Grand Historian at the Han court under the Wudi Emperor a total of 167 ancestral temples existed within the prefectures of the Han realm [7]. The prosperity of ancestral temples reflected a thriving tradition of ancestral worship amongst the Han elites, who, as shown through the orders of the Gaozu and Huidi emperors, were an integral part in the funding and construction of such monuments.

However, in Qian's time economic involvement was not the only nor the most prominent way by which Western Han elites were involved in royal ancestral worship. In fact, through Qian's accounts in *Shiji* it is seen that being able to take part in ancestral worship with the royal family and other elites was taken as supreme honor, and is to be rejected if one believes that one is not qualified to take part in the act. An example of this development in Western Han elite culture is seen in Qian's *Biography of the Wendi Emperor* where when the Wendi emperor Liu Heng was still a local lord yet was

prompted by court officials to take the seat of the emperor, he expressed reluctance to honor the Gaozu emperor at the ancestral temple because he was "not adequately qualified, and therefore is unfit to honor our ancestor" [7]. It is clear that in this case even Liu Heng, being a son of the emperor, held the act of honoring at the ancestral temple in high regard. Indeed, the homage was not only prevalent in a traditional sense, but in fact was also politically significant in that the qualifications to honoring the Gaozu emperor directly influenced the qualifications to the inheritance of emperorship. Liu Heng became emperor when he agreed to honor the Gaozu emperor at the ancestral temple after the pleas of his supporters amongst the court elites.

Qian's divination of Liu Bang in his *Biography of the Gaozu Emperor* reflects cultural elements fundamental to the thriving tradition of ancestral worship in this period. One of the primary reasons for which ancestral worship was popular amongst the Western Han elites was that they believed in the spiritual ability of the ancestors to influence the present. Western Han elites, particularly during the reign of the Wudi emperor, under whose rule Qian wrote *Shiji*, thought that the world in which they lived could consciously respond to their actions. Indeed, cosmologically, the Han elites believed that "humans are the base to which everything in the world exists...yet humans must obey the sky and the earth. [8]" One explanation for the link between Liu Bang and this belief in the willpower of the world is seen through Liu Bang's mythology in Qian's accounts. Contrary to the popular connection between the divine birth story of Liu Bang and Han ancestral worship, divinity was not a crucial element in the cosmological system of Western Han elites [6], upon which their traditions of ancestral worship was built. Rather, Qian provided evidence for an alternate explanation by explicitly recording that prior to Liu Bang's mother's encounter with the dragon which made her pregnant, she "slept at the banks of a great lake and met the lake god in her dream. [7]" The stress on the obedience to and fear of nature in Han cosmology coincides with Qian's accounts of Liu Bang being associated with not only the realm of the divine, but also of nature itself; an important prelude to the arrival of the dragon was his birthmother's encounter with a spirit of the natural world. This serves as a further testament to the cosmological belief amongst Western Han elites that the world in which they lived had its own will [6], and demonstrates that apart from Liu Bang's identity as the founding emperor of the Han empire, it was also his connection to nature and the elites' belief that nature's will could influence their lives that contributed to his supreme position in the Han elites' system of ancestral worship.

2.2. Western Han Theology and Liu Bang's Mythology

Despite the strong religious developments in the traditions of ancestral worship amongst the Western Han elites it was nevertheless not a complete reflection of the theological framework by which the Han elites interpreted divine order. In the early years of the Han regime the theology of the dynasty more often provided the metaphysical background with which philosophers and ideologists justified their claims. An intricate symbiosis existed between the theological and the political where the boundaries between political philosophy and theologic doctrine in the early ages of the Han empire was to an extent obscured. A demonstration can be seen from Creel's analysis of the Legalist philosophers and the Taoist mystics in the early years of the Han, where "various Legalist philosophers took Taoism background against which to construct their system of complete totalitarian despotism" [9], Apart from Legalism another example is seen in the ideology of wu-wei, where the idea of non-interference in nature that is accounted in Lao-tzi becomes the "recognized principle of government" in early Han rulers [9]. The scholarship on the chronological as well as historical intricacies and discrepancies of religious and political thought in the early Han period, notably Taoism and Legalism, is well sorted in the historiographical summaries in Creel's work, yet such cultural phenomena have undergone drastic transformations by Sima Qian's time, and therefore will not be explored in further detail in this essay.

However, by Qian time era under the Wudi emperor's regime a mature theologic world based on mysticism, traditional deities, and Taoist celestials called xian has rapidly formed amongst the Han elites. One significant motivating factor was that the Wudi emperor himself was a devoted believer, and personally patronized mystics called fangshi who he believed could communicate with the divine and make him immortal [5]. A few examples attest to the vigor that the Wudi emperor portrays in his pursuit of immortality, the most notable being the first mystic, Li Shaojun, that he patronized, who, according to Sima Qian's Book of the Feng and Chan Homages, earned the emperor's favor by claiming that an old bronze artifact in the Han palace was "used by the Heng king of the Qi (reigned 685-643 BC) as an offering at the Bo-qin altar" [1]. The Wudi emperor hence believed him to be a centuries old sage who lived in the form of a child, and strongly patronized him and supported his theory of ingesting gold for immortality. Indeed, the emperor also changed the ceremonies of imperial homages to nature, which was traditionally aimed at praying for good seasons and harvests, to majestic rituals that purposed for the attraction of celestial presence [10].

Apart from the emperor himself, the Han court elites serving under Wudi's rule also were devote believers and patrons of this form of Taoism influenced mysticism.

Therefore, the extent to which the Han elites valued mystic practices and rituals was immensely great. In fact, one of the most influential and respected member of the Han elites at the time, Dong Zhongshu (179-104BC), have explicitly written that in times of great sorrow or misfortune, rituals of ancestral worship can be temporarily paused yet rituals of celestial homage cannot; the latter is more important than the first [8]. Considering the prosperity and longevity of the tradition of ancestral worship amongst the Han elites, analyzed in detail in the previous section, this serves as a vivid testament to the status that Taoism-influenced mysticism held amongst the Han elites. Unsurprisingly, the theology that comes to birth from this background of elite patronage and recognition was correspondingly complex and ornate. Qian, in writing for the court elites under such a cultural surrounding, included a detailed account of Western Han theologic order in Shiji, which the present essay will only briefly describe as in depth investigation of the topic would involve contextual and analytic discussions that deviates from the subject of this essay. Apart from the shen, a foundational element to Han theology during this period was the belief in xian, immortal celestials originating from Taoist mysticism. Han elites believed that a form of connection existed between the mortal world and the world of the xian, and efforts to achieve immortality could foster a transition from a mortal human to an immortal xian. Wudi's majestic rituals and faith in mystics are examples of such efforts.

This newly matured theologic order brought about peculiar ideological changes in the Han elites in regards to their attitudes towards the mythology of Liu Bang. Thus, it was not the abandonment of Liu Bang's mythological status but instead the elites' strong desire for immortalization, lead by the emperor himself, that resulted in Liu Bang's downgrade in Han theology. The same conclusion applies to ancestral worship, where it's quality of being a tradition of homage that is unconcerned with immortality but rather merits and ceremonial significance allowed Liu Bang's traditional supremacy to remain untouched.

3. LIU BANG'S DIVINITY AND WESTERN HAN IMPERIAL LEGITIMACY

Apart from the religious implications for the Western Han elites that Qian's mythological accounts of Liu Bang reveal, an equally important political aspect must also be discussed. Liu Bang's identity as the son of a dragon in *The Biography of the Gaozu Emperor* provides insight into the development of the symbolic significance of the dragon within the Han dynasty, where the continuity of the dragon being a symbol of imperial power manifested in the political culture of the Han elites. The dragon thus became an avenue by which Han elites legitimized their status and power. The Han elites also used similar

reasoning to justify militaristic expansions of the Han empire.

Sima Qian's Biography of the Gaozu Emperor provides a detailed account about Liu Bang's lineal relationship with a dragon, where his mother was pregnant after "a dragon was upon (her body)" [1]. The question that remains out of such an ample amount of dragon related characterization in Qian's historical record is twofolds: meaning-wise, what is the symbolism behind Qian's accounts about the dragon? Purpose-wise, what does Qian seek to convey through this particular form of characterization? To ascertain the meaning of the dragon in Qian's accounts, the idea of dragon during the Han dynasty and its contextual development must be understood.

Sima Qian himself describes the dragon to be "indication of the ruler of man. Such is Shihuang"[1], showing that the concept of the dragon being a symbol of the ruler was not refuted following the political change between the Qin and the Han, but rather was one of the few ideological products of the Qin that was openly accepted as a continuous tradition in the Han. However, the Han dynasty elites had a higher degree of complexity in their interpretation of the dragon as compared to the Qin ruling class, where dragons with different colors and forms had different powers.

This cultural context to the meanings of the dragon amongst the Western Han elites also sheds light on Qian's aim in his mythological accounts of Liu Bang; with the powerful court elites as his audience Qian's accounts of history likely contains a tailored appeal that is politically intended. In implying that the Gaozu Emperor is the son of a guardian dragon Qian draws a connection between the Gaozu Emperor and the metaphysical, justifying his establishment of the Han dynasty to be one that is not only supported by forces of the divine, but moreover a force that provides protection and security. In fact, Qian actively compares the Han dynasty to the Xia's "barbarism of the people", the Shang's "superstition of the people", Zhou's "lack in authenticity of the people", and the Qin's "brutal laws", claiming that the Han was prosperous because it "changed according to the mistakes of the past, alleviated the turmoil of the people, and thus unified (the Central Plain) with the favor of the divine.[1]" The idea that the Han dynasty was founded with divine favor as a guardian figure that corrects the wrong's mistakes and brings a new life that "alleviated the turmoil of the people" to its realm corresponds strongly with Liu Bang's identity as the son of the guardian dragon. Implicitly, Qian claims that Liu Bang was fated at birth to overthrow the Qin dynasty and establish a new regime that brought order and prosperity to its realms. In this sense, Han rule is characterized to be both inevitable and a blessing for its people, and thus was legitimate.

Notably, the legitimacy of Liu Bang as a ruler and of the Han regime also extends onto the court elites serving

the empire, who either shared familial ties with Liu Bang or held important positions within the Han imperial apparatus. In this respect the elite collective shared a common interest with the legitimacy of the Han empire[11], for the legitimization of Liu Bang's power succession as an usurper was necessary for the legitimization of the regime that he established, which provides the valuable basis of power and status for the Han court elites. Thus the elite were actively engaged in popularizing and proliferating the mythology of Liu Bang being the son of a dragon. In fact, existing evidence show that even at the end of the Western Han dynasty the idea of deriving legitimacy from Liu Bang still remained a crucial element in one's succession to power.

4. CONCLUSION

Qian's dual identity as both a member of the Western Han court elite collective and as the imperial historiographer for the elite collective during Wudi's reign colors his Shiji with complex qualities that reveals insight about the Han elites in his historical accounts. In this essay Qian's accounts of Liu Bang in The Biography of the Gaozu Emperor have been given specific attention for its particularly abundant mythological accounts, a select facet of which have been investigated in detail in relation to its politico-cultural implications about Qian's contemporary court elites. This essay argues that Liu Bang's relationship with the lake spirit in his birth story was reflective of a prosperous tradition of ancestral worship, which was based on the belief that the world had interactions with humans, amongst the elite collective. Moreover, it was not only his identity as the founder of the Han regime, but furthermore his relation with nature, that constituted his supreme position within the numerous subjects of ancestral worship. However, the picture becomes more complicated when a maturation of Han theology developed under Wudi's reign; combined with the emperor and subsequently the elites' strong pursuit of immortality and the belief in the power of the Taiyi god to make them immortal, Liu Bang's status within Han theology was no longer supreme as it was within the system of ancestral worship.

Nonetheless, limitations to Qian's accounts exist. One should not over-exaggerate the extent to which Qian was reflecting court cultures in his documentations and neglect the inherently subordinate relationship between Qian and the court elites who were most involved in the idolization of the Gaozu Emperor. The fact that Qian is writing to serve the needs of the imperial family makes it a possibility for his accounts to not be a reflection of court elite culture, but rather a product of the elites' demands. Thus, Qian might have been documenting what the court elites wished to be recorded, the motives of which are clear in regards to the Gaozu emperor; by mythologizing Gaozu's identity the court elites could gain permanent legitimacy to their attained powers, and in addition the

nobles and the emperor are able to claim connections to the divine using the familial lineage they share with the Gaozu Emperor. Furthermore, elements of the mythology of Liu Bang may have been added or distorted in posterity. However, efforts to prove or disprove suspected changes within Qian's work is difficult if not impossible given the current lack in related physical evidence and literary record, and although limitations to the source exists in said aspects, it is nevertheless clear that a certain degree of the idolization and divination, reflective of both cultural and political realities, of the Gaozu emperor existed amongst the Western Han dynasty's court elites in Qian's time.

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