

SHI JI 85: THE BIOGRAPHY OF LÜ BUWEI

He strengthened family ties between Zichu and his royal kin and set the counsellors of the feudal lords to vying with one another, seeing who could lend most eloquent support to his bid for power in Qin. Thus I made “The Biography of Lü Buwei”.

Lü Buwei was a great merchant of Yangdi who, by travelling here and there, buying cheap and selling dear, had accumulated a fortune amounting to thousands in gold.

In the fortieth year of the reign of King Zhaoxiang of Qin (267 BC), the crown prince died, and two years later, in the forty-second year of his reign, the king designated his second son, Lord Anguo, as crown prince. Lord Anguo had over twenty sons. He had a concubine of whom he was extremely fond and whom he had designated as his consort with the title of Lady Huayang, but she had borne him no sons. By another concubine, of the Xia family, who no longer enjoyed his favour he had a son named Zichu, one of the younger among his twenty or more sons. Zichu had been sent by the state of Qin to be a hostage at the court of Zhao,¹⁶⁵ and since, in spite of this, Qin had several times invaded Zhao, the Zhao court accordingly treated Zichu with scant respect. Being merely a grandson of the king of Qin and the son of a concubine, and having been sent as hostage to one of the other feudal states, Zichu was poorly provided with carriages and other equipment and had to live in straightened circumstances, unable to do as he pleased. Lü Buwei, visiting Handan, the capital of Zhao, on business, saw him and was moved to pity. “Here is a rare piece of goods to put in my warehouse!” he exclaimed.

He then went and called on Zichu, remarking, “I know how to enlarge your gate for you!”

Zichu laughed and said, “You’d better enlarge your own gate before you worry about mine!”

“You don’t understand,” said Lü Buwei. “The enlarging of my gate *depends* on the enlarging of yours!”

Zichu, guessing what was in his mind, led him to a seat in an inner room and the two were soon deep in conversation. “The king of Qin is old and Lord Anguo has been designated crown prince,” Lü Buwei said. “I am told that Lord Anguo is very much in love with Lady Huayang, and since she has no son of her own, it will be up to her alone to decide which son shall be

appointed as the rightful heir. Now you have twenty or more brothers, and from the point of view of age, you are about halfway down the line. You enjoy no particular favour and have been a hostage at the court of one of the other feudal lords for a long time. If your grandfather, the old king, should pass away and Lord Anguo become king, I'm afraid you would have little chance of competing for the position of crown prince with your elder brothers or with your other brothers who are there in person morning and evening to wait upon your father."

"True," said Zichu. "But what can I do about it?"

Lü Buwei said, "You are poor and living in a foreign land. You have nothing to use as gifts to present to the members of your family or to attract a band of followers about you. I too am poor, but with your permission I would like to take a thousand measures of gold and travel west on your behalf to Qin, where I will wait upon Lord Anguo and Lady Huayang and see to it that you are made the rightful heir."

Zichu bowed his head and said, "If indeed it should turn out as you say, when the day comes I hope you will allow me to divide the state of Qin and share it with you !"

Lü Buwei accordingly took 500 measures of gold and presented it to Zichu to be used as expense money in attracting a band of followers, and with another 500 he purchased various rare objects, trinkets, and toys, which he took with him west on a trip to Qin. There he sought an interview with the elder sister of Lady Huayang and asked that the gifts he had brought be presented to Lady Huayang. He took the opportunity to mention how virtuous and wise Zichu was, how he had friends among the followers of the various feudal lords all over the world, how he was constantly heard to exclaim, "Her Ladyship is as precious as Heaven itself to me!", and how he wept day and night with longing for his father, the crown prince, and Lady Huayang. Lady Huayang was very pleased with this message.

Lü Buwei then persuaded the elder sister to speak to Lady Huayang to this effect: "They say that one who has only beauty to offer a man will find, as beauty fades, that his love grows cold. Now you wait upon the crown prince but, though he loves you dearly, you have no son. Before it is too late, should you not take this opportunity to choose one of his sons whom you deem worthy and befriend him, seeing to it that he is elevated to the position of rightful heir and treating him as your own son? Then, as long as your husband lives, you will enjoy honour; and when his hundred years of life are ended and the one whom you call son becomes king, you need never fear any loss of position. This is what they call 'speaking one word that brings ten thousand years of gain.' But if now in blossom time you do

not make certain that your roots are firm, then when beauty has faded and love grown cold, though you might hope for a chance to 'speak one word', how could you gain a hearing? Now Zichu is a worthy man and, being far down the line, knows that he cannot hope to become heir by the normal order of succession. In addition, his mother enjoys no favour, and so he offers all his devotion to you. If you were truly willingly to use this moment to pluck him from the line of succession and make him the heir, then to the end of your days you would enjoy favour in the state of Qin!"

Lady Huayang, convinced of the truth of this argument, waited until her husband, the crown prince, was at leisure and then casually mentioned that Zichu, who had been sent as hostage to Zhao, was a man of outstanding worth and that everyone coming from abroad praised him highly. Then, with tears in her eyes, she said, "I have been fortunate enough to be assigned to your women's quarters, but not so fortunate as to bear a son. I beg you to give me Zichu for a son and to set him up as the rightful heir so that I may have someone to entrust my fate to!"

Lord Anguo gave his consent and had a jade tally engraved to this effect which he divided with Lady Huayang, promising that he would make Zichu his rightful heir.¹⁶⁶ Then Lord Anguo and Lady Huayang sent rich gifts to Zichu and asked Lü Buwei to act as his tutor. As a result, Zichu became increasingly renowned among the feudal lords.

Lü Buwei had selected from among the ladies of Handan one of matchless beauty and great skill in dancing and had lived with her, and in time he learned that she was pregnant. Zichu, joining Lü Buwei in a drinking bout, happened to catch sight of her and was pleased. Immediately he stood up, proposed a toast to Lü's long life, and asked if he might have her. Lü Buwei was outraged, but soon recalled that he had by now invested all of his family's wealth in Zichu in hopes of fishing up some wonderful prize, and so in the end he presented the woman to him. She concealed the fact that she was pregnant, and when her time was up, she bore a son who was named Zheng. Zichu eventually made her his consort.

In the fiftieth year of his reign (257 BC) King Zhaoxiang of Qin sent Wang Yi to lay siege to Handan and, when the situation grew critical, the men of Zhao wanted to kill Zichu. Zichu and Lü Buwei plotted together, however, and distributed 600 catties of gold to the officers who were in charge of guarding them. In this way Zichu managed to escape, make his way to the Qin army, and eventually return home. The men of Zhao then proposed to kill Zichu's wife and child, but because his wife was the daughter of a wealthy family in Zhao, she was able to go into hiding; thus both mother and son escaped alive.

King Zhaoxiang of Qin passed away in the fifty-sixth year of his reign

(251 BC). The crown prince, Lord Anguo, succeeded him as king, Lady Huayang became queen, and Zichu was made crown prince. The state of Zhao obliged by sending Zichu's wife and son Zheng to their new home in Qin. The king of Qin passed away after one year of rule and was given the posthumous title of King Xiaowen. The crown prince Zichu succeeded him and is known as King Zhuangxiang. Queen Huayang, whom King Zhuangxiang had come to treat as a mother, was given the title of Queen Dowager Huayang, and his real mother, whose family name was Xia, was called Queen Dowager Xia.

In the first year of his reign (250 BC), King Zhuangxiang made Lü Buwei his chancellor and enfeoffed him as marquis of Wenxin with the revenue from 100,000 households in Henan and Luoyang.

King Zhuangxiang passed away after three years on the throne and the crown prince Zheng became king. He honoured Lü Buwei with the position of prime minister and as a mark of respect addressed him as Zhongfu or Uncle. The new king of Qin was still young and his mother, the former concubine of Lü Buwei, who had now become queen dowager, from time to time had sexual relations with Lü Buwei in secret. Lü Buwei had some 10,000 male servants in his household.

This was the period of Lord Xinling of Wei, Lord Chunshen of Chu, Lord Pingyuan of Zhao, and Lord Mengchang of Qi, all men who were willing to humble themselves before others and who delighted in gathering bands of followers about them, seeking in this way to outdo one another. Lü Buwei felt that, since Qin was a powerful state, it was disgraceful for it not to do likewise, and so he too set about attracting gentlemen to his service with offers of generous rewards and treatment, and in time gathered as many as 3,000 men who lived and ate at his expense. This was also the period when there were many skilled debaters in the various feudal states, men such as Xun Qing¹⁶⁷ who wrote books and circulated them throughout the world. Lü Buwei accordingly ordered each of his retainers to write down what he himself had learned, and then collected and edited the results into a work comprising eight *lan* or "surveys", six *lun* or "discussions", and twelve *ji* or "records", totalling over 20,000 characters. It was intended to embrace all the affairs of heaven, earth, the ten thousand things, yesterday, and today, and was entitled "The Spring and Autumn of Mr Lü."¹⁶⁸ The text was posted on the market gate of Xianyang, the Qin capital, with 1,000 pieces of gold suspended above it. An invitation to the wandering scholars and retainers of the various feudal lords informed them that the 1,000 in gold would be awarded to anyone who could add or subtract a single character from it.

The king of Qin, who was later to bear the title of First Emperor of the Qin, in time grew to manhood, but his mother, the queen dowager, did not cease her wanton behaviour. Lü Buwei began to fear that, if her conduct were ever brought to light, he himself would become involved in the scandal. He therefore searched about in secret until he found a man named Lao Ai who had an unusually large penis, and made him a servant in his household. Then, when an occasion arose, he had suggestive music performed and, instructing Lao Ai to stick his penis through the centre of a wheel made of paulownia wood, had him walk about with it, making certain that the report of this reached the ears of the queen dowager so as to excite her interest. She received the report and, as had been expected, wanted to have the man smuggled into her quarters. Lü Buwei then presented Lao Ai, at the same time getting someone to pretend to accuse him of a crime for which the punishment was castration. Lü Buwei spoke to the queen dowager in private, pointing out that, if the man were subjected to a mock castration, he could then be taken into service in the queen's private apartments. The queen accordingly sent lavish gifts in secret to the official who was in charge of performing the castration, who then pretended to carry out the sentence, plucking out the man's beard and eyebrows and making him into a "eunuch". In this way he eventually came to wait on the queen, who carried on clandestine relations with him and grew to love him greatly. In time she became pregnant and, fearing discovery, pretended to conduct a divination that indicated that, in order to avoid a period of evil influences, she should move from the palace and take up residence in Yong. Lao Ai was constantly in attendance on her and received lavish gifts and awards. All decisions were made by Lao Ai, who was waited upon by an entourage of several thousand male servants. His followers numbered over 1,000, all men who flocked to him in hopes of attaining government office.

In the seventh year of the king's reign (240 BC) Queen Dowager Xia, the mother of King Zhuangxiang, passed away. Earlier Queen Dowager Huayang, the queen of King Xiaowen, had been buried with her husband, King Xiaowen, at Shouling, and Queen Dowager Xia's son, King Zhuangxiang, had been buried at Zhiyang. Accordingly, Queen Dowager Xia was buried separately at a spot east of Du where, in her words, "I may look eastward to my son and westward to my husband. After 100 years, a city of 10,000 households will surely grow up by my side."

In the ninth year of the king's reign someone reported that Lao Ai was not a real eunuch at all, but had constantly been engaging in secret misconduct with the queen dowager, and that she had borne him two sons, both of whom were being kept in hiding. "He and the queen dowager have

agreed,” said the report, “that, when the present king passes on, one of these sons shall succeed him.”

The king thereupon referred the matter to his officials for investigation and all the facts were brought to light, including those that implicated the prime minister Lü Buwei. In the ninth month Lao Ai and his three sets of relatives were executed, the two sons whom the queen dowager had borne were put to death, and the residence of the queen was officially transferred to Yong. Lao Ai’s followers were all deprived of their household goods and sent into exile in Shu.

The king of Qin wanted to put the prime minister Lü Buwei to death as well but, because he had won great distinction in the service of the former king, and because so many followers and men of eloquence came forward to speak on his behalf, the king could not bring himself to apply the death penalty. In the tenth month of the tenth year of his reign the king of Qin removed Lü Buwei from the office of prime minister.

Later Mao Jiao, a man of Qi, spoke to the king of Qin and persuaded him to send to Yong for his mother, the queen dowager, and allow her to return to residence in Xianyang. The king also ordered Lü Buwei, the marquis of Wenxin, to leave the capital and proceed to his fief in Henan. A year or so later he learned that so many of the followers and envoys of the various feudal lords were travelling to Henan to call on Lü Buwei that their carriages were never out of sight of each other on the road. Fearful that there might be some plot afoot, the king sent a letter to Lü Buwei saying, “What did you ever do for the state of Qin that Qin should enfeoff you in Henan with the revenue from a 100,000 households? What relation are you to the ruler of Qin that you should be addressed as ‘Uncle’? Be so good as to take your family and retinue and move your residence to Shu!”

Lü Buwei judged that he would only have to suffer increasing insult and, fearing the death penalty,¹⁶⁹ he drank poison and died. With Lü Buwei and Lao Ai, the two men who had been the butt of his anger, both dead, the king recalled Lao Ai’s retainers who had been exiled to Shu. In the nineteenth year of his reign his mother, the queen dowager, passed away and was given the posthumous title of Empress Dowager. She was buried with her husband, King Zhuangxiang, at Zhiyang.

The Grand Historian remarks: Lü Buwei and Lao Ai were both honoured with fiefs, the former receiving the title of marquis of Wenxin. When accusations were first made against Lao Ai, Lao got word of it. The king of Qin questioned those about him as to the truth of the charges but had not

yet uncovered any definite evidence when he set off for Yong to perform the suburban sacrifice. Lao Ai, fearful that calamity was about to befall him, plotted with the members of his clique and, using the queen dowager's seal of authority without her permission, called out troops and initiated a revolt in the Qinian Palace. The king dispatched officers to attack Lao Ai's forces and Lao Ai fled in defeat. He was pursued and cut down at Haozhi, and eventually his whole clan was wiped out. This marked the beginning of Lü Buwei's fall from power. What Confucius said about the "man of fame" might well apply to this Master Lü, might it not?[170](#)