Causes of Xiang Yu's Defeat in Sima Qian's Records of the Grand Historian

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Abstract. Xiang Yu (232–202 BCE), who bore the title Hegemon-King of Western Chu, was a pre-eminent warlord in the late Qin and early Han dynasty periods. Xiang Yu's fate is famously portrayed by Sima Qian in the Records of the Grand Historian, a foundational text of Chinese historiography. This article explores the depiction Sima Qian gives regarding the reasons that led to the defeat of Xiang Yu. Drawing on narrative and discourse analysis of the *Shiji*, the article demonstrates which factors Sima Qian presents as the reasons for Xiang Yu's collapse. It argues that Sima Qian attributes the downfall of Xiang Yu to his own flawed political decisions and personal deficiencies, but not to destiny. Among the Key Factors are Xiang Yu's huge strategic blunders, abandoning defensible ground and spurring revolts, his hubris and brutality, his refusal to listen to good counsel, and his inability to delegate power or motivate loyalty among his followers. Sima Qian portrays the waning Xiang Yu's defeat as a sin, which highlights the Confucian perspective of the importance of virtuous and kind leadership for effective rulership.

Keywords: Xiang Yu, *Shiji*, Liu Bang, *Hanshu*, Bangu.

1. Introduction

Xiang Yu (c. 232–202 BCE), the "Hegemon-King of Western Chu," was a dominant warlord who contended with Liu Bang during the chaotic Chu–Han civil war following the Qin dynasty's collapse. Despite his early successes, Xiang Yu was ultimately defeated and died by suicide in 202 BCE. Our knowledge of these events largely comes from Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*), compiled about a century later. In the *Shiji*'s Basic Annals of Xiang Yu, Sima Qian emphasizes that Xiang Yu's downfall was not due to fate but to his own failures. Sima Qian explicitly criticizes Xiang Yu's strategic and personal flaws—for example, Xiang Yu "boasted of his own achievements and military offensives" and refused to "take antiquity as [his] model," relying instead on brute force. Likewise, Sima Qian notes that Xiang Yu's defeat "comes about through his own inability to use other men well". The present paper will examine how the *Shiji* attributes Xiang Yu's defeat to such causes, analyzing Sima Qian's narrative and commentary to understand the historian's perspective on Xiang Yu's failure by using the narrative and textual analysis of the *Shiji*, it identifies the factors that Sima Qian highlights as leading to Xiang Yu's downfall.

2. Background

2.1. Historical Background (Chu–Han War)

At the war's outset, Xiang Yu had overwhelming advantages – far larger armies and territory, and the prestige of the "Hegemon-King" as head of the rebel coalition. Liu Bang, by contrast, began with a modest peasant following and felt inferior to Xiang Yu. However, Liu Bang's persistence proved decisive. He attracted brilliant generals and steadily improved his army and logistics. By 204–203 BCE, Xiang Yu's forces were exhausted by years of campaign, while Liu Bang's coalition controlled the richer north. In short, Xiang Yu started the Chu–Han War with decisive victories and vast resources, but Liu Bang's unexpected resilience and strategic alliances eventually set the stage for Xiang Yu's defeat.

2.2. Sima Qian's Portrayal of Xiang Yu

Sima Qian depicts Xiang Yu as a general who is immensely strong, capable on the battlefield, but also stubborn and reckless. Xiang Yu is also depicted as having exceptional martial skill and personal charisma, which explains his early military success, in the Records of the Grand Historian. The story includes several incidents such as his personal involvement at some crucial battles, and his confrontational attitude against Liu Bang, which are intended to demonstrate that he depended so much on personal valor and force as tools of leadership. However, Sima Qian also frequently recounts Xiang Yu's propensity for not heeding advice and making decisions based on immediate feelings rather than long-term policies. These patterns of behavior, which are continually highlighted throughout, act in Sima Qian's telling as a portent for early symptoms of the ineffectual leadership that led to the fall of Xiang Yu.

3. Analysis

3.1. Strategic and Tactical Errors

Xiang Yu was supposed to be a terror to his enemies, the brash commander with that awesome tactician kung-fu, who could never see the bigger picture. His downfall was of three cardinal strategic miscalculations. The first was the elision of Guanzhong. The plain of Guanzhong, surrounded by mountains and the Yellow River, was also the safest and most fertile part of China. It was the home base from which Qin had subdued all others. After seizing the Qin capital, the soldiers of Xiang Yu, impatient to go back to the east, were said to have clamored: "Enrich oneself, become famous and do not return home is to wear embroidered clothing and walk in the dark" [1]. Xiang Yu fulfill died his agreement, and gave up the "kingdom of mountains and rivers" for his capital in Pingcheng, a city in an exposed plain, easily besieged from north, south, east and west. This alone gave Liu Bang the strategic key to empire. With the three Qin generals defeated and Guanzhong secured by Liu Bang, he now had a fortress no one could break and a granary to power his war. Two, the destructive enfeoffment system was a political disaster in its own right. It was a "futile attempt to revivify a dead political system" [2]. When dividing the empire by his own personal fancy, Xiang Yu roused enemies on all sides. He estranged powerful men as Tian Rong in Qi and Chen Yu, who also raised arms immediately. It sent Xiang Yu into a kind of "whack-a-mole," as he was forced to lead his armies on endless marches up and down the Central Plain in order to put down rebellions, sapping his resources and the stamina of his troops. He was never able to solidify his power; he was always reacting to the next crisis.

Thirdly, Xiang Yu had no 'party line,' demonstrating a total absence of any sensible basis for politics. He sought not political inclusion, but military defeat and domination. He governs through terror, not through administration. Liu Bang, by contrast, had a keen political mind about war. With the conquest of the Guanzhong, he went so far as to proclaim a "three-point law", doing away with the severe Qin code and immediately winning the love of the people. While Xiang Yu was slaughtering cities and turning away potential supporters, Liu Bang was solidifying a government, protecting supply lines, and forming a political coalition broad enough to govern China.

3.2. Leadership and Personal Flaws

What doomed Xiang Yu was not just his strategic miscalculations and misjudgments, but also his personal character flaws (as the Shiji scrupulously records).

His greatest weakness was arrogance and political naivety. This is most famously depicted at the Feast at Hongmen, a dinner at Hongmen where treachery was planned. Xiang Yu had Liu Bang surrounded and outnumbered, and yet he was more pitied than killed. His most trusted counsellor, Fan Zeng – whom he reverentially referred to as his "sub-father" –was incessantly urging him to kill Liu Bang, aware that he represented a catastrophic threat to him in the future. Xiang Yu, however, hesitated. He could not "take it in his bosom" to kill a man who had fallen to him so far [3]. This

wasn't kindness, however, but hubris; he just never could imagine Liu Bang as a real rival. He let Liu Bang slip through his hands, a blunder that would result in the loss of his empire.

His cruelty, bitterness and vindictiveness matched his arrogance. Xiang Yu's brand of warfare is best described as "car-splitting," boiling, and massacres. After crossing the Julu battle line, he notoriously buried 200,000 Qin prisoners of war alive. And he slaughtered the people of Xiangcheng, and the Qin capital of Xianyang was then razed, including the imperial palace and libraries [3]. Such cruelty was a "strategic liability" (Twitchett and Loewe 118). It scared the people and made cities fight to the death rather than fall to him. It too made potential lieutenants gravitate towards Liu Bang and gave his opponent the moral high ground that he could not contest.

In the end, Xiang Yu was also defined by his profound lack of trust and delegation, which proved to be a talent-killing disaster. It also relates that he was "personally kind and gentle," but "when conferring titles and fiefs," he "clutched the seals until the corners were worn smooth, unable to bear to part with them" (Sima Qian, Shiji, ch. 8, Biography of Han Xin). Such distrust and envy chased away the men who actually could have saved him. Han Xin, one of the greatest military geniuses in Chinese history, reverted to Liu Bang's ranks from Xiang Yu. Chen Ping, a brilliant strategist, also fled, with a warning about Xiang Yu "is suspicious by nature... and cannot use his men. "All this expertise drained directly to Liu Bang, and though he himself was riddled with personal flaws, he had the 'genius of recognizing genius,' and allowing others talent to grow. Sima Qian notes that a single truly worthy adviser to Xiang Yu, Fan Zeng, "and he could not use him," which also led to his fleeing away to die of frustration.

3.3. Sima Qian' Moral Ending of Xiang Yu

Campaign Xiang Yu's last stand on the Wu River is one of the most heart-wrenching moments in Chinese literature. He fights, surrounded, with superhuman courage, and kills hundreds of Han soldiers before he commits suicide. Sima Qian deprives him of a simply heroic fate. From his raft in this dying hour, Xiang Yu looks up at the sky and wails, "It is Heaven that destroys me!" This is the tragedy of his self-delusion. It was not Heaven that destroyed him, but he destroyed himself by his own actions" (Sima Qian, Shiji, ch. 7) as Sima Qian's later "Appraisal" makes clear.

Sima Qian presents "Xiang Yu's suicide as the 'natural outcome of a man who... regards "Heaven," not himself, as the source of his misfortune' ('Sima Qian's Appraisal'). His disaster was a moral disaster. He had the "prowess" of king but not the "virtue" and "benevolence" to rule. He was the opposite of the Confucian sage-king. He "trusted to his own private wisdom" and strove to "govern by force," a course that, for Sima Qian, can only end in disaster.

4. Comparison with Ban Gu's Hanshu

In contrast, Xiang Yu is not treated as a founding emperor in Ban Gu's Hanshu (Book of Han), but is included in a joint account: the "Chen Sheng and Xiang Yu" zhuan in juan 31. Ban Gu subordinates Xiang Yu from being hero to founder to a fellow wanderer in the journey narrating the collapse of the Qin. As the Tang commentator Yan Shigu (581–645) points out, "Han Shu reorganized and transformed the Shiji's Basic Annals of Xiang Yu and the Shi Sheng lineage into a liezhuan …they should all be ranked among the biographies by right." [1]. This relocation is meaningful: in the history of the official Han, Xiang Yu is not afforded his own "benji," but he is placed with Chen Sheng, the peasant rebel leader and first Qin popular insurrectionist, so that he is associated with a previous Qin popular uprising, rather than as a great king on his own merits.

Such structural inversions reflect different narrative priorities. Recent research has highlighted that the two texts, Shiji and Hanshu, have very different approaches to storytelling: Sima Qian's wax figure takes its place among the process and theatre of act and scene, while Ban Gu's text is simply more objective. History through narration: Shiji and Hanshu Yang, Lei observes that "Shiji provides rich descriptions of major power struggles" and offers historical change through narrative development, whereas its scope was more limited in reporting events in "Hanshu" [3]. Sima Qian, in

a sense, attends to the ‘how’ of Xiang Yu’s rise and fall – the great battles, conversations, and moments of crisis – while Ban Gu ›concerns himself with the ‘what’: the overall political outcome and the moral of the story. The application of the stylist metric method to compare Shiji and Hanshu by Deng et al. [4,5]. There are, in fact, stylistic differences between these two texts that are clearly composed. The language and style of Hanshu are terser and more annalistic; Shiji is more comprehensive and narratively. Together, these give us Hanshu narrating Xiang Yu’s life with a chilly, officious voice more reminiscent of the Shiji’s colorful-vivid narrative style.

Hence, so do their explanations of demise of Xiang Yu. Sima Qian blames his loss on a combination of personal overconfidence and fate of tragedy: for not making the most of the opportunity at Gaixia, for ignoring wise advisers (such as Fan Zeng), and for underestimating Liu Bang [6]. Although Sima does not spare him, he is rebuked for not heeding good advice – he also mourns “that a great hero should be defeated by fate”. Ban Gu’s story, however, is that Liu Bang’s inherent decent1y eventually emered triumphant §§. Han triumphs (and or turning points such as Han Xin’s wars) are brought to the fore while things such as Xiang Yu’s weaknesses are understated without outright condemnation [7]. The consequence is that the Hanshu’s version of the moral behind the Xiang Yu story is more instructive: pride and cruelty cause one to fall, while modesty and faith (represented by Han founders and generals) cause one to be blessed by Heaven.

5. Discussion

Sima Qian describes Xiang Yu’s defeat as a tragedy of his own making rather than the will of fate. At a strategic level, Xiang Yu also made fatal errors, including giving up the easily defensible and well-resourced Guanzhong plain and parceling out land in a manner that provoked widespread rebellion. As a person, he was arrogant and cruel, making enemies of allies and breaking the trust of his followers. For instance, at the Feast at Hongmen, he hesitated for personal reasons and let Liu Bang go, a decision that led to his downfall [8]. These developments paired to sap the vitality of Xiang Yu and seal the fortune of Liu Bang [9].

In contrast, Liu Bang was a political pragmatist and a leader who listened to good advice—in stark contrast to Xiang Yu. Sima Qian employs the narrative of Xiang Yu to extol a Confucian moral: Zen mastery of power is through virtue and benevolence, not its operation by force. As Sima Qian observes, lasting success "is not built upon coercion, but is nurtured by virtue and benevolence." In the end, Xiang Yu becomes a tragic person who, although might physically, was fatally flawed by the mere fact that he was mortal [10,11]. In Sima Qian’s rendering, even the most formidable individuals cannot surpass divine morality; it is Xiang Yu’s own weaknesses that are his undoing and which warn all others.

6. Conclusion

The result of this study is that Sima Qian accounts the loss of Xiang Yu mainly to his own military errors and personal faults, and not to fate or luck. Drawing on the above findings, the paper through this depiction, Shiji articulates a Confucian historiographical logic in which ethical authority and humane governance ultimately outweigh sheer military strength, thereby transforming Xiang Yu from a defeated warlord into a tragic moral exemplar. This study provides an interesting approach on early Han historiography and the depiction of leadership by demonstrating Sima Qian’s narrative reading/interpretation of historical events as moralizing lessons. It underscores the critical importance of personal virtues, in particular benevolent conduct and reliance on advisors, in Sima Qian’s assessments of rulers.

This study serves as a significant reference for future research in this field where the consideration of moral and psychological elements within historical narratives is de-emphasized. It primarily affects perceptions of how ancient Chinese historians such as Sima Qian constructed the political actor as one invested with virtue rather than force. Future study might pay particular attention to comparative

representations of Xiang Yu in other historical texts (for instance Ban Gu's Hanshu) and to the issue of fate vis à vis personal agency in Chinese historiography. Such analysis would enhance our understanding of the interplay of morality and power in the political thought of early China.

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