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On Subsidiary Chu-Han Advisors in the Shiji


Abstract: Focusing on Chu-Han advisors and orators without independent biographies in the Shiji, this article examines the victory of Han and the defeat of Chu by comparing different attitudes Liu Bang and Xiang Yu received from unknown advisors. It further discusses how those unknown advisors helped their masters from the Chu-Han battles to the foundation of the Han dynasty. Finally the article appreciates Sima Qian’s marvelous recording of the skills of those advisors.

Key Words: Shiji; Chu and Han; Advisors; Sima Qian

摘 要：本文圍繞楚漢時期那些在《史記》中沒有傳記的謀士、辯士展開，通過比較劉邦、項羽對待小謀士的不同態度和行為，探討漢勝楚負的原因；並從漢初幾位大功臣的遭際，探討小謀士在楚漢戰爭以及漢初立國這一特殊時期對歷史的推動作用。最後簡析司馬遷在記載這些謀士時所體現出的高超筆法。

關鍵字：《史記》 楚漢 謀士 司馬遷
The period from 210 to 200 B.C. witnessed a tumultuous time in Chinese history. As the tyrannical reign under the first Emperor of Qin and his son was strongly resisted by all classes of society, their everlasting dream was quickly shattered by peasant uprisings. In spite of the collapse of Qin, there was no peace until the foundation of Han ended a four-year battle between Liu Bang 刘邦 (256 B.C. - 195 B.C.) and Xiang Yu 项羽 (232 B.C. - 202 B.C.), two uprisings’ leaders. During ten-years of turbulence, numerous heroes emerged, whose merits were later recorded and classified into Shi ji’s “Annals” or “Hereditary Households.” Thanks to Sima Qian, their feats can be read by readers over two thousand years later.

Many studies have been done on Chu-Han characters in the Shi ji; yet most of them concentrate on those important figures that were powerful enough to command or save any situation. However, a further meticulous reading of history in this time will make us realize that besides those of huge achievements, some unknown advisors and orators also moved the history forward. Although some of them proposed only a word or two, they also made contributions to the development of history and should not be neglected after all.

Thereupon, the author decided to focuses on Chu-Han advisors and orators without independent biographies in the Shi ji. Although all of their strategies were not necessarily wise or acceptable, they may help us understand many questions in the study on Chu-Han period.

I. The Connection between Unknown Advisors and the Outcome of Chu-Han Battle

The question concerning why Han could defeat Chu has been put under close scrutiny since the end of the Chu-Han battle. Scholars have done a thorough analysis on famous advisors like Zhang Liang 张良 (r 250 B.C. - 186 B.C.), Xiao He 萧何 (257 B.C. - 193 B.C.), and Chen Ping 陈平 (? B.C. - 178 B.C.), yet they usually ignore unknown advisors.

1. Opposing Opinions from the Unknown
Although Liu “did not care for scholars”不好儒 and “often showed arrogance and humiliated other people”慢而侮人, he accepted advice not only from celebrated advisors, but also from the unknown ones. This all-inclusive attitude enabled him to make the right decision at every critical moment.

Having escaped from the “Siege of Xing-yang” by luck, Liu rallied the forces with the help of soldiers and provender. He was ready to get back to the battle, when Yuan Sheng 袁生 tried to persuade him:

Han and Chu have held each other at bay at Xing-yang for several years and Han has often been in straightened circumstances. I would ask that My Lord King go out through the Wu Pass; Xiang Yu will have to lead his troops and flee southward. Yours Majesty can dig deep trenches and allow [the troops at] Xing-yang and Cheng-gao a little time to get some rest. Send Han Xin and others to appease [those] north of the He in Zhao territory, join with Yan and Qi, and then, My Lord King, if you run again to Xingyang it will not be too late. If you do this, the places Chu must defend will be many, its strength divided, and Han will be able to rest, to again give them battle, and the defeat of Chu will be certain.¹

According to Yuan Sheng, Han should avoid a head-on confrontation with the Chu army, and then concentrate all the efforts on diverting its force. After the Chu army exhausted the provisions in battle, it could be annihilated. What a terrific strategy! Ling Zhilong 漢稚隆 from the Ming dynasty commented on this: “To

² "Wei Bao Peng Yue liezhuan” in Shiji 史記·魏豹彭越列傳, p.590.
³ 袁生 in Hanshu.
⁵ “Gaozu benji” in Shiji 史記·高祖本紀, p.373.
concentrate all the efforts on diverting the Chu army is the key to defeating it. The Chu army was stranded then. Yuan Sheng is really good at strategy. Liu Bang was very wise to follow his advice. Although Yuan Sheng appeared only once in the Shiji, he indeed made an important contribution to the victory of Han against Chu.

Apart from accepting advice from his own advisors, Liu Bang also took it from other people. After he appeased the central plains, a virtuous village man surnamed Dong 董 suggested the following,

Your subject has heard that ‘Prosperity if conform to virtue and extinction if violate virtue’, ‘If sending troops without legitimate reason, cannot be successful.’ For this reason there is saying that ‘Publicizing the enemy’s crime, only then did enemy be defeated be you.’ Xiang Yu was so brutal, banished and killed his master (Emperor Yi), that he is a sinner of all over the world. If you have benevolence, you do not rely on cruelty at the same time if you have righteousness, you do not rely on force. Now if you let all army wear mourning clothes for Emperor Yi and notice all the vassals to show that this time you send troops to the East to crusade against Xiang Yu (for Emperor Yi’s death), the whole country will respect your virtue. This is a deed of follow the three kings(King Yu of Xia state, King Tang of Shang state, King Wen and Wu of Zhou state).

臣聞“順德者昌，逆德者亡”，“兵出無名，事故不成”。故曰“明其為賊，敵乃可服”。項羽為無道，放殺其主，天下之賊也。夫仁不以勇，義不以力，三軍之眾為之素服，以告之諸侯，為此東討伐，四海之内莫不仰德。此三王之舉也。7

Liu Bang accepted this advice immediately. According to royal etiquette, he first exposed his left arm to show respect to the deceased King Yi of Chu, announced his death, and after a three-day mourning he informed all the marquises of Xiang Yu’s crime, putting Xiang Yu under public censure. Willing to take Master Dong’s advice,

7 Master Dong’s saying does not exist in Shiji, but in “Gaodi ji” in Hanshu 漢書・高帝紀, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), p. 34.
Liu won the moral and popular support, and launched the battle thereby justified against Chu. Master Dong’s deed was only recorded in this passage, but it directly contributed to the victory of Han.

As for advice, if only it was beneficial to Han, Liu Bang accepted it completely, whether its basic consideration was for Han or not. On the journey to the Pass, Liu Bang followed Zhang Liang’s advice to besiege the Wan City tightly so as to capture it safely. A little before, Liu Bang had slaughtered people in the Ying-yang City, and the same bloody scene could have recurred in the Wan City. At this urgent moment, the prefect of Nan-yang was going to commit suicide. To save the innocent people and the prefect, the houseman Chen Hui volunteered to advice for Liu Bang:

Your subject has heard that you, Honorable Sir, have an agreement that whoever first enters Xian-yang will be made king there. Now you, Sir, tarry to deal with Wan. Wan is the capital of a great commandery. It joins several dozen walled cities together, its populace is large, its provisions plentiful, its officers themselves believe that to surrender would mean certain death; for this reason they have all climbed the city walls to put up a resolute defense. Honorable Sir, if you wait here all day long to attack [Wan], those of your warriors who die or suffer injury will be numerous. If you lead your troops away from Wan, Wang will pursue you. Honorable Sir, in what lies ahead, you will lose the agreement over Xian-yang, in what lies behind, you will have the trouble of mighty Wan. If I were laying plans for you, Sir, nothing would be better than to work out an agreement for surrender, enfeoff this governor, order him to stay and guard Wan, and you lead his armored foot soldiers with yours to the west. All the walled cities which have not yet submitted, when they hear the news, will compete in opening their gates and await you, allowing you to pass through [Nan-yang] with nothing to trouble you.8

臣聞足下約，先入咸阳者王之。今足下留守宛。宛，大郡之都也，連城

數十，人民眾，積蓄多，吏人自以為降必死，故皆堅守乘城。今足下盡
日止攻，士死傷者必多；引兵去宛，宛必隨足下後：足下前則失咸陽之
約，後又有彊宛之患。為足下計，莫若約降，封其守，因使止守，引其
甲卒與之西。諸城未下者，聞聲爭開門而待，足下通行無所累。9

Zhang Liang had advised Liu to attack the Wan City before: “Although the
Magistrate of Pei intends to hurry into the Pass, the Qin troops are still many and they
will resist from redoubts. If you do not cause Wan to submit, Wan will strike you from
behind, and with mighty Ch’in in front, this will become a precarious way沛公雖欲
急入關，秦兵尚眾，距險。今不下宛，宛從後擊，強秦在前，此危道也!”10 As Chen
Hui also understood Liu Bang’s urgent goals and anxiety, he hit right on the point as
Zhang Liang did. No wonder Liu Bang said “Well put”善 and “made the Governor of
Wan of the Marquis of Yin殷” as soon as he heard this. Chen Hui’s words saved Wan
City from a disaster and at the same time benefited Liu Bang greatly, “he led his
troops west, there was none which did not submit引兵西，無不下者”, in this way the
obstacles to enter into the Pass were largely cleared. This is a crucial reason that
allowed Liu Bang to enter the pass quickly. The Song scholar Nisi倪思noticed this
and said, “The advice given by Chen Hui is more for Han than for Wan又有陳恢者謀
之，非宛計，實漢計.”11

Liu Bang not only valued advice from unknown advisors, but also awarded them
abundantly once he accepted it. For example, he appointed Chen Hui the Marquis of a
thousand households,12 Master Dong董, the Marquis of Cheng城,13 and Master Hou
侯, who once successfully persuaded Xiang Yu to send Liu’s parents and wife back
the ruler of Ping State平國君.14 Even Tian Ken田肯, the man who advised Liu to
deprive Han Xin韓信 of Duke of Chu楚, was awarded five hundred grams of gold.15

Seeing this, more people with talents were willing to follow Liu Bang and offer him

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9 “Gaozu benji” in Shiji, pp.359-360.
12 “Gaozu benji” in Shiji, p.360.
13 Chu Han Chunqiu 楚漢春秋 in Shiji zhengyi 史記正義, Shiji, p.370.
14 “Xiang Yu benji” in Shiji 史記·項羽本紀, p.331.
15 “Gaozu benji” in Shiji, pp.382-383.
advice. By examining these unknown advisors, we understand that Liu Bang was inclined to take advice and make appointments on merit. Ban Gu said, “The Founder of the Han Dynasty stabilized the country by punitive expeditions. The gentry came to exert their wisdom and oratory, and helped him attain the achievements. Shenzi (r. 390 B.C.- 315 B.C.) says, it takes more than one log to build the temple, just as it takes more than one person’s capacity to score the emperor’s achievements. That’s for sure! 高祖以征伐定天下，而縉紳之徒騁其知辯，並成大業。語曰：‘廊廟之材非一木之枝，帝王之功非一士之略’ 信哉!” It should be admitted that it is the favorable relationship between Liu and his advisors that contributed to the victory of Han.

On the contrary, let’s discuss the reasons that Xiang Yu was defeated. First there is Fan Zeng (277 B.C.- 204 B.C.). He was not normally an advisor, but proved the most indispensable advisor under Xiang Yu’s command. We will include Fan Zeng in the discussion considering that there might not be enough information on hand for Sima Qian to write an individual biography of him.

Fan Zeng had followed Xiang Liang, Xiang Yu’s father, since Xiang Liang rose in revolt. After Xiang Liang’s death, Fan Zeng continued to assist Xiang Yu. In view of Fan Zeng’s senior position, Xiang Yu respected him as surrogate father. However, Xiang Yu valued his seniority more than his advice, and seldom accepted it. After Liu Bang breached the city wall of Xianyang, Fan Zeng said to Xiang Yu,

When the governor of Pei was living east of the mountains he was greedy for possessions and delighted in beautiful girls. But now that he has entered the Pass he has not taken a single thing, nor has he dallied with any of the wives or maidens. This proves that his mind is not set upon minor joys. I have sent men to observe the sky over the place where he is encamped, and they all found it full of shapes like dragons and tigers and coloured with five colours. These are the signs of a Son of Heaven. You must attack him at once and not lose this chance!17

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16 “Li, Lu, Zhu, Shu and Sun zhuan” in Hanshu 漢書·酈陸朱劉書孫傳, p. 2131.
17 “The Basic Annals of Xiang Yu”, translated by Burton Watson, Records of the Grand Historian, Han Dynasty I,
沛公居山东时，贪於财货，好美姬。今入关，财物无所取，妇女无所幸，此其志不在小。吾令人望其气，皆为龙虎，成五采，此天子气也。急击勿失。18

Yet Xiang Yu was so compassionate that he missed the best chance to kill Liu Bang.

Later a series of battles were launched near Xingyang between Chu and Han. Because it was short of food, the Han army requested to make peace. Xiang Yu planned to accepted its proposal when Fan Zeng came to admonish him and said,

It is easy enough to make concessions to Han, but if you let him go this time and do not seize him, you are bound to regret it later.19

漢易與耳，今釋弗取，後必悔之。20

Xiang Yu accepted his advice and ordered that Xing-yang be besieged immediately, yet he fell for Chen Ping’s scheme of sowing discord and forced Fan Zeng to leave him. Then Fan Zeng died on the way back to the Peng City and Xiang Yu no longer any reliable advisors.

Actually Xiang Yu did have enough people to assist him. For example, he was offered advice on arriving at Xianyang:

The area within the Pass is protected on all four sides by a barrier of mountains and rivers, and the land is rich and fertile. This is the place to make your capital and rule as a dictator.21

關中阻山河四塞，地肥饶，可都以霸。22

This advice was beneficial to Chu’s status of that time. However, Xiang Yu thought it over and refused it, saying, “one who becomes rich do not return

18 “Xiang Yu benji” in Shiji, p. 311.
20 “Xiang Yu benji” in Shiji, p. 315. Pei Yin 裴駰’s Jijie 集解 said: “Chu Han Chuqiu, Yangzi 楊子’s Fayan 法言 said the advisor is Cai Scholar 蔡生; Hanshu Han Scholar 蒙生.”
22 “Xiang Yu benji” in Shiji, p. 315.
hometown is just like one who walks at night gorgeously dressed with no spectators. “富贵不归故乡，如衣绣夜行，谁知之者！” Unsatisfied with Xiang Yu’s words, the adviser made these caustic remarks, “it is truly said that a native of Chu is worthless in imposing attire, just like a macaque decked out in a hat. 人言楚人沐猴而冠者.” Xiang Yu was furious at this and boiled him alive. Given that people offering good advice were not respected and even killed, who would dare to assist him at the risk of death? Considering this, Xiang Yu’s capable advisers such as Han Xin, Chen Ping and Qing Bu 武布(? B.C.- 195 B.C.) crossed over to Liu Bang. It was Xiang Yu himself that blocked off abundant support from people, so he was destined to lose the battle despite his huge talent.

There is only one exception: when Xiang Yu attacked the Waihuang 外黄. After he finally succeeded occupying the city, he intended to bury alive all the adult men to vent his rage. At this critical moment, the son of the houseman serving the Waihuang magistrate went to visit Xiang and said,

Waihuang, oppressed by the might of Peng Yue, was fearful and surrendered to him, hopeful that Your Majesty would come to the rescue. But now that you have arrived, if you butcher all the men, how can you hope to win the hearts of the common people? East of here there are still a dozen cities of Liang, but all will be filled with terror and will not dare to surrender.

Xiang Yu found his words reasonable and then remitted the people’s punishment from death. This demonstrated that Xiang Yu was not that stubborn any more. However, it was too late for him to realize it, for Fan Zeng had died and Chu was besieged by Han Xin, Peng Yue 彭越(? B.C.- 196 B.C.) and Liu Bang’s army. The contantious relationship between Xiang Yu and his advisors.

foreshadowed his future failure.

2. Liu Bang and Xiang Yu’s Different Utilization of Advisors

On the one hand, both Chu and Han had armies pitted against each other; on the other hand, advisors still played a crucial role in the battle. Considering that this study is limited to advisors without a biography in the *Shiji*, advisors just like Li Yiji 酈食其 (? B.C. - 203 B.C.) are not included in this discussion.

Let’s look at Sui He 隨何 first. After the Han army had been defeated at the Peng City, Liu Bang realized that he was no match for Xiang Yu and that he desperately needed the assistance of other military forces. Sui He stepped forward to persuade Qing Bu, the King of Jiujiang 九江王. His eloquence won Qing Bu’s half support, and later Sui told the Chu emissary that Qing Bu had already surrendered to Liu Bang, which forced Qing Bu to kill the emissary and raise troops against Chu. It was Sui’s great wisdom and courage that help Liu take over many cities and territory at the cost of not a single soldier. In his own words, his contribution outweighed that of fifty thousand foot soldiers and five thousand horsemen. Another eloquent advisor, Master Hou 侯, helped Liu Bang’s parents and wife return to him.

The above cases and other similar ones show that Liu Bang’s evaluation of advisors saved him many efforts and brought him great profit. However, it was too late for Xiang Yu to finally realize the function of advisors when Han Xin’s army occupied the north of the Yellow River and Qi 齊, and the Chu army tried to rescue the one led by Long Qie 龍且. Aware of the seriousness of the situation, Xiang Yu immediately sent Wu She 武涉 to negotiate with Han Xin:

The [states of the] world have suffered under the Qin for a long time, helping each other and joining strength to attack Qin. When Qin had been defeated, [We] calculated merit, divided up the land, and enthroned kings to let the officers and soldiers rest. Now the King of Han again mobilized his troops to move east. He invaded people’s allotments and seized people’s lands. After he had defeated the [Three] Qin, he led his troops out of the Pass and collected the troops out of the Pass and collected the troops of the feudal
lords to go east and attack Chu. His intention is not to stop until he completely swallows up the world. His inability to know surfeit goes to this kind of extreme. Furthermore, the King of Han cannot be trusted. He has been in the grasp of King Xiang several times. King Xiang pitied him and let him live. However, when he managed to escape, he then turned against the agreements and attacked King Xiang again. In this way [it can be seen] he cannot be intimated or trusted. Now Honorable Sir, although you consider yourself have close relations with the King of Han and try your best to deploy troops for him, in the end you will be caught by him. The reason why you are able to be at ease till now is that King Xiang is still alive. At present, the matter of the two kings rests with you. If you cast [your lot] to the right, then the King of Han will win; If cast the left, then King Xiang will win. If King Xiang perished today, then [the King of Han] would next seize you, Honorable Sir. You, Honorable Sir, have an old tie to King Xiang. Why not rebel against Han, ally and join with Chu and divide the world in three, reigning as a king? Now you throw away this opportunity and definitely entrust yourself to Han to attack Chu; would a wise man indeed act like this?²⁵

天下共苦秦久矣，相與力擊秦。秦已破，計功剖地，分土而王之，以休士卒。今漢王復興兵而東，侵人之分，奪人之地，已破三秦，引兵出關，收諸侯之兵以東擊楚，其意非盡吞天下者不休，其不知厭足如是甚也。且漢王不可必，身居項王掌握中數矣，項王憐而活之，然得脫，輒倍約，復擊項王，其不可親信如此。今足下雖自以與漢王為厚交，為之盡力用兵，終為之所禽矣。足下所以得須臾至今者，以項王尚存也。當今二王之事，權在足下。足下右投則漢王勝，左投則項王勝。項王今日亡，則次取足下。足下與項王有故，何不反漢與楚連和，參分天下王之？今釋此時，而自必於漢以擊楚，且為智者固若此乎！²⁶

²⁶ “Huaiyin hou liezhuan” in Shiji 史記·淮陰侯列傳, p. 2262.
Wu She was a top advisor with foresight and sagacity. However, once appointed as the King of Qi, Han Xin was content with the title and had no inclination to revolt against Liu.

II. Unknown Advisors Connected to the Fate of Several Founders of Han

Besides advisors directly serving Liu Bang and Xiang Yu, there were many around the vassals. Accepting advisors’ advice or some extent affected the vassals’ circumstances as well as on the outcome of the Chu-Han battle.

1. Zhang Er, Chen Yu and Their Advisors

During the Chu-Han period when feudal lords vied for the throne, some men seized territory and set up separatist regimes by force. Some supported either Chu or Han, but others oscillated between Chu and Han. The different choices brought them different results. For example, Zhang Er 張耳(? B.C. – 202 B.C.) was fortunately appointed by Liu Bang the King of Zhao 趙, one of the eight vassals with different surnames in the early Han. His son Zhang Ao 張敖 married Princess Luyuan 魯元, the only daughter of Empress Lv. An investigation into Zhang Er’s success cannot exclude the advice from his advisors.

After Wu Chen 武臣, the King of Zhao, had been murdered by the low ranking officer Li Liang 李良, Zhang Er made a lucky escape with Chen Yu 陳餘(? B.C. – 204 B.C.). When he was deliberating on how to foster and strengthen his personal influence, an advisor came to offer him advice:

Milords are sojourners [in Chao], yet you want to cause Chao to ally itself to you—this will be difficult. Only if you enthrone a descendant of [the] Chao [royal family] and support him righteously, can you attain success.27 兩君羈旅, 而欲附趙, 難; 獨立趙后, 扶以義, 可就功。28

Zhang Er took his advice and then enthroned Zhao Xie 趙歇. By doing this, he won people’s support and consolidated his power.

Afterwards, Zhang Er doubted Chen Yu’s allegiance because of Chen’s faint attempt to save the Zhao state. To maintain their sworn brotherhood, Chen Yu untied the General seal from the ribbon and passed it to Zhang Er. Astounded and reluctant to take it, Zhang Er received some advice from one of his advisors:

You subject has heard that ‘When one does not take what Heaven grants to take, one will receive its calamity in its wake.’ Now that General Ch’en has given Milord his seal, if Milord does not accept it, you go against Heaven and that would not be propitious. Quickly, take it!  

臣聞“天与不取，反受其咎”。今陳將軍與君印，君不受，反天不祥。急取之！

Although this advice suggested an ultimate breakup between Zhang Er and Chen Yu, it was beneficial to Zhang Er. Thereupon, Zhang Er wore the General seal and took over the army. Despite the fact that the disruption of their relationship became was held to be a huge error, Zhang Er did benefit a great deal by strengthening his force.

To avenge himself, Chen Yu later defeated Zhang Er by resorting to Tian Rong’s 田榮 assistance. As a result, Zhang Er intended to seek refuge with Xiang Yu, who possessed a well-trained and powerful army. Moreover, Xiang Yu once rescued him in a battle against Qin at Julu 巨鹿 County, and then conferred on him a title later. But an advisor surnamed Gan 甘 said to Zhang Er:

When the King of Han entered the Pass, the Five Planets were in conjunction in Tung-chin 東井 (the Eastern Well [constellation]). Tung-ching, is Ch’in portion [of the heavens]. The first to arrive [within the Pass] had to have been made Hegemon. Although Chu is mighty, later it will have to be subordinate to Han. 漢王之入關，五星聚東井。東井者，秦分也。先至必霸。楚雖強，後必屬漢。

32 “Zhang Er Chen Yu liezhuan” in Shiji, p. 2581.
Zhang Er accepted this advice and switched his allegiance to Liu Bang. This was a significant decision in Zhang’s life. Wang Shizhen王世貞 (1526-1590), a scholar in the Ming dynasty, commented on Zhang Er as follows: “The wealth and rank of Zhang Er’s posterity should be attributed to Master Gana甘. Otherwise, he would have accompanied Xiang Yu in the siege of Gai-xia垓下 and died with him in the River Wu烏江.”

Sima Qian praised Zhang Er “virtuous” six times in Zhang’s biography. Through the analysis above, we may know that Zhang was virtuous at collecting many intelligent advisors, just like Sima Qian saying “their retainers[down to] the lowest kitchen drudge were eminent heroes in [whatever state]under heaven they lived in and there were none who did not take the positions of minister or chancellor 賓客廝役，莫非天下俊杰，所居國無不取卿相者.” What’s more important, Zhang is ready to accept good advice. That is what differs Zhang from Chen Yu, who was also thought virtuous but actually could not cope with Zhang.

After Zhang Er and Chen Yu fell foul of each other, Han Xin and Zhang Er led ten thousands of soldiers to attack the Zhao state. Chen Yu gathered two hundred thousand soldiers at the fortress of the Jing-xing井陘 County. Chen Yu had sufficient preponderance over geography and number of people. Moreover, an advisor named Li Zuoche 李左車 offered him a strategy:

I have heard that Han Xin, a general of Han, waded across the Western Ho, took the King of Wei prisoner, caught Xia Yue, and recently spilled blood at Yu-yu. Now, aided by Chang Er, he discusses intending to subdue Chao. In this [situation], having left his own state and fighting far from home, following up on a victory, his vanguard could not be resisted. I have heard that if provisions are transported from a distance of a thousand 里, the soldiers will have a look of hunger on their faces, and if they cook only after

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chopping firewood and cutting grass, the troops will not go to sleep with full stomachs. Now on the road through Jing-xing, two carriages cannot move alongside each other and cavalry cannot ride abreast. Advancing for hundreds of li, the circumstances will be such that the provisions must be following after them [the army]. I hope you, Honorable Sir, will lend me 30,000 ambuscaders and from an unfrequented route I will cut off his supplies and gear. You Honorable Sir, dig deep trenches, construct high barricades, strengthen the camp and do not give them battle. They will not be able to fight when they advance and not able to return [to their base] when they retreat. My ambuscaders will cut off their rear, leaving nothing in the fields to be plundered. In less than ten days, the heads of the two commanders could be presented under your banners. I hope Your Lordship will give heed to my plan. Otherwise, you will for sure be caught by [those] two men. 

聞漢將韓信涉西河，虜魏王，禽夏說，新喋血閼與，今乃輔以張耳，議欲下趙，此乘勝而去國遠鬥，其鋒不可當。臣聞千里餽糧，士有飢色，樵蘇後爨，師不宿飽。今井陘之道，車不得方軌，騎不得成列，行數百里，其勢糧食必在其後。願足下假臣奇兵三萬人，從閒道絕其輜重；足下深溝高壘，堅營勿與戰。彼前不得鬥，退不得還，吾奇兵絕其後，使野無所掠，不至十日，而兩將之頭可致於戲下。願君留意臣之計。否，必為二子所禽矣。

If Chen Yu had followed his advice, he would have possibly defeated Han Xin’s army. However, Chen Yu was too self-willed to take the advice and was beheaded in the battle. Hong Mai (1123-1202) pointed out, “Li Zuoche told Chen Yu not to fight Han Xin’s army in deep trenches constructed with high barricades; but Chen Yu disregarded it totally and was captured in battle. On the other hand, Commandant Deng advised Zhou Yafu, a later General in the
Western Han, to dig deep trenches and construct high barricades so as to trap the Wu army. Zhou followed his advice and witnessed the enemy fleeing in defeat. The strategies from Deng and Li are actually identical to each other, but brought different consequences李左國說余深溝高壘勿與戰, 余不聽, 一戰成擒。鄧都尉說亞夫深溝高壘, 待其自斃, 亞夫從之, 吳果敗亡。李、鄧之策一也。而用、不用異耳."37 This shows the importance of taking proper advice from advisors.

2. Xiao He, Han Xin and Their Advisors

As a senior vassal to Liu Bang, Xiao He was loyal to him and won his trust. Nonetheless, Xiao He might have suffered from unexpected calamities if he had not been receptive to advice.

During the seesaw battle at Jingsuo 京索, Liu Bang sent emissaries repeatedly back to the Pass to console Xiao He who took charge of logistical support. An advisor surnamed Bao 鮑 said to Xiao He:

While His Majesty is forced to camp in the fields and suffer the hardships of exposure, he sends envoys to reward and encourage you. It must be that he doubts your loyalty. I think it would be best for you to summon all your sons and brothers who are fit to take up arms and send them to join the army. Then the king will surely have greater confidence in you.38

王暴衣露蓋，數使使勞苦君者，有疑君心也。为君計：莫若遣君子孫昆弟能勝兵者，悉詣軍所，上必益信君。39

Xiao He followed his advice and sent his sons and brothers over to Liu Bang. Liu Bang was greatly delighted.

After the death of Xiang Yu, Xiao He assisted Empress Lv in killing Han Xin. Then Liu appointed him the minister and granted him a fief of five thousand households 五千戶, and bestowed on him a private retinue of 500 soldiers headed

37 Shiji pinglin, Vol. 5, p. 760.
by a colonel to act as his bodyguard 令卒五百人一都尉為相國衛. All the vassals congratulated him on the extreme imperial favor except an advisor called Shao Ping 召平. He regarded the favor as a bad omen of disaster and said to Xiao He:

The emperor is away in battle and has left you to guard the capital area, and yet, though you suffer none of the perils of war, he suddenly increases your fief and grants you a bodyguard. It must be that, because of the recent revolt of Han Xin in the capital area, he doubts your loyalty. He has granted you a bodyguard not for your own protection but because he does not trust you. I beg you to decline the new enfeoffment and not accept it, but instead to make a contribution to the expenses of the campaign from your own private wealth. Then the emperor’s mind will be set at ease.40

上暴露於外,而君守於中,非被矢石之事。而益君封置衛者,以今者淮陰侯新反於中,疑君心矣。夫置衛衛君,非以寵君也。愿君讓封勿受,悉以家私財佐軍,則上心說。41

Willing to take this advice, Xiao He politely declined Liu Bang’s favor and donated all his money to the military. Then Liu Bang was filled with joy.

A year later, Qing Bu started a revolt and Liu Bang went to suppress it in person. During that time, he sent emissaries quite many times to visit Xiao He. Some advisor warned Xiao that “It will not be long before your family is wiped out 君滅族不久矣.” The advisor explained:

You have been make prime minister and given the highest rank in the empire. There is no further honor that can be added to this. Now it has been over ten years since you first entered the Pass and won the hearts of people. They are all unswervingly loyal to you, for you have ceaselessly and with the greatest diligence worked for their peace and well-being. The reason the emperor keeps sending to ask what you are doing is that he is afraid you will betray him and start an uprising within the Pass. Why don’t you buy up a lot

of land on credit and start speculating in goods at a cheap price so that you will create a reputation for being corrupt? Then the emperor’s mind will be set somewhat at ease.42

夫君位為相國，功第一，可復加哉？然君初入關中，得百姓心，十餘年矣，皆附。君常復孽孽得民和。上所為數問君者，畏君傾動關中。今君胡不多買田地，賤賒貸以自污？上心乃安。43

Xiao He followed his advice to dispel Liu Bang’s misgivings, and Liu was once again delighted greatly.

The Ming scholar Tang Shunzhi唐順之(1507-1560) said, “Were it not for the strategy from Xiao He's advisors such as Master Bao and Shao Ping, Xiao He hardly could escape from the death非鮑生、召平與客之計，何幾於不免虎口哉.”44 Another Ming scholar, Dong Fen董份(1510-1595), commented, “The reason why the chancellor could escape from the death is that he took advice three times from his advisors. It is so difficult to keep the merits. The Marquis of Huaiyin was defeated due to the lack of advisors, which implies that a vassal’s survival also lies in advisors’ strategy. Alas相國所以免禍者，以三得謀智士耳。功名難處如此，淮陰之敗以无士也，存亡在所畫，悲哉!”45

As one of the founders of the Han state, Han Xin took advice modestly in his early life and scored victories successively; yet he turned over-confident and finally met a violent death, “just like the hound got boiled after the death of the hare”狡兔死，走狗烹46.

Han Xin was greatly resourceful and well versed in the art of war. Having defeated Chen Yu's army with a force inferior in number, Han just consulted his advisor Li Zuoche for more advice. Complying with Li’s instructions, Han fostered strengths and circumvented weaknesses. The emissaries sent by him successfully induced the Yan state to capitulate, and then the Han army won the

44 Shiji pinglin, Vol. 4, p. 631.
victory without striking a blow. Then he accepted advice from the orator Kuai Tong and captured the Qi state. His merits are closely connected to advisors. However, later on, as Han Xin over valued his own judgments and totally ignoring the advice from his two advisors, Wu She and Kuai Tong, was unwilling to betray Liu Bang. Just as his advisors expected, after Xiang Yu’s death, Han Xin was first deprived of military power, then reduced to the Marquis of Huaiyin from the King of Chu, and was finally murdered by Empress Lv and Xiao He. It was not that no advisors offered Han Xin advice, but that their efforts went in vain. To avoid being implicated by Han, they had to pretend to be insane shamans.

Based on the analysis above, the Qin-Han period was an age of heroes, including not only those who sat within a command tent and devised strategies that assured victory a thousand 里 away, but also those unknown advisors with remarkable insights. No matter whom they were, kings or vassals, their ability to listen to views usually decide whether they could realize their ambition or was vital to their success.

III. Sima Qian’s Writing Techniques on Unknown Advisors

In possession of heroic conception of history, Sima Qian highly respected the heroes by writing biographies for them, because those famous heroes were able to conform to historical trends and occupy leading positions. Besides that, it is worth noticing that Sima Qian did not despise or ignore those unknown characters that made contributions, too. The discussion above has already demonstrated this clearly. Although many of them left nothing except just one commendable strategy, this very strategy recorded by Sima Qian was sufficient to earn them a place in history. With this remarkable knowledge of history, Sima Qian showed great originality in portraying those secondary characters. We can see this from three aspects:

Firstly, he did so through language. As advisors and orators mentioned in this study persuaded others mainly by their glib tongues, their wisdom is included in
their exact words. Aware of this key point, Sima Qian always made advisors’ words compatible with their identity. For example, the word “must” was used twice when Yuan Sheng went to persuade Liu Bang, which demonstrates Yuan’s confidence in his own strategy. Another advisor Master Dong, a local official in charge of education, often quoted allusions and idioms in persuasions, especially enjoying words such as “humanity”仁, “righteousness”義, “morality”德, “Three Kings”三王. In contrast, orators like Kuai Tong, Sui He and Wu She inherited the agitative style of political strategists in the Warring States Period. A detailed study at all three lies beyond the scope of this article; we only take a close study on Sui He. Sui went to persuade Qing Bu to betray Chu, yet he was not received by Qing Bu for three days. Thereupon, Sui He swayed the Great Sacrificial Butcher 太宰 by the following words:

[The reason] that the King does not meet me must be that he considers Chu mighty and considers Han weak. This is why your servant is an envoy. If I, the envoy He, get to meet [him], and what I say is correct, then this is what the Great King wants to hear. If what I say is wrong, then this envoy, He, and twenty other people will be submitted to the axe and block in a marketplace of Huai-nan, so as to make clear that the King turns his back to Han and is friendly with Chu.47

It must have been a huge shock that Sui He would ask for an audience at the cost of his own life, although similar words had been heard from the political strategists in the Warring States Period. The Great Sacrificial Butcher reported to Qing Bu instantly, and then Qing received Sui. Being asked why he depended on Xiang Yu, Qing Bu answered that he was subject to Xiang Yu. His words

47 “Ch’ing Pu, Memoir 31”, In The Grand Scribe’s Records, Vol. 8, p.50.
48 “Qing Bu liezhuan” in Shiji 史記·黥布列傳, p. 2600.
provoked Sui He to a harangue:

You, Great King, and King Xiang are both ranked as feudal lords. If you face north and serve him as a vassal, you must consider [the King of] Chu so mighty that you are able to entrust your state to him. When King Xiang Led an expedition against Qi, he carried wallboards and pestles on his shoulders and went before his officers and men. You, the Great King, should exhaust the host of Huai-nan and lead them in person to act as vanguard of the Chu army, but now you send four thousand men to aid Chu. Does one who faces north to serve another as a vassal necessarily act like this? When the King of Han fought at Pengcheng and King Xiang had not yet left Qi, you, Great King, should have swept up the troops of Huai-nan, forded the Huai [River] and given battle day and night beneath the walls of Peng-cheng. [Yet] you, Great King, who possess a host of ten-thousand men, did not have a single man ford the Huai, [but] with your arms crossed looked on to see who would win. Does one who entrusts his state to another necessarily act like this? You, Great King, hold to an empty title [of King] as a means to be close to Chu [Xiang Yu], but should intend to rely on yourself. Your servant privately considers that for you, Great King, this is not a good choice. If this is so, but you, Great King, do not turn your back to Chu [because] you consider Han weak, although the army of Chu is mighty, the world has burdened him with the name of the unrighteous because he betrayed the agreement of the covenant and killed Emperor Yi. If this is so, the King of Chu relies on success in battle and his own might. [ Whereas] the King of Han gathered the feudal lords, returned and defeated Cheng-gao and Xing-yang, transported the grain of Shu and Han [to these cities], deepened trenches, built up earthworks, and assigned soldiers to defend borders and man fortifications. If the men of Chu make their armies return [to Xing-yang], they will be separated [from Chu] by Liang to fight, they will unable to, and if they attack walled cities, their strength will incapable of it. The old and the weak [of the Chu army] will have to transport provisions from over a thousand li away. When the troops of Chu arrive at Xing-yang and Cheng-gao, Han will resolutely defend it and not move. If they advance, they will not be able to launch and attack, and if the
withdraw, they will not be able to disengage. For this reason I say that the troops of Chu are not worth relying on. If Chu gains victory over Han, then the feudal lords will be frightened of the danger to themselves and will go to each other's rescue. The might of Chu is only suited to bring on the troops of the world and that is all. For this reason Chu is not as good as Han, this situation is easy to see. Now, Great King, you do not assist safe and sound Han, but entrust yourself to endangered and dying Chu. Your servant privately thinks that you, Great King, are infatuated by him [Xiang Yu]. Yours servant does not think that the troops of Huai-nan are enough to destroy Chu. [But] if you, Great King, send out troops [to Han] and turn your back on Chu, King Xiang will be sure to remain [in Chu]. If he remains there for several months, then Han will be able to take the world can be considered safe and sound.

Your servant requests that I raise my sword and go over to Han with you, Great King. The King of Han will be sure to dived up territory and enfeoff you with it, Great King, not to mention Huai-nan. Huai-nan is sure to be possessed by you, Great King. For this reason, the King of Han respectfully sent me as an envoy to present this foolish plan, hoping that you, Great King, would take notice of it. 49

楚，臣竊為大王惑之。臣非以淮南之兵足以亡楚也。夫大王發兵而倍楚，項王必留；留數月，漢之取天下可以萬全。臣請與大王提劍而歸漢，漢王必裂地而封大王，又況淮南，淮南必大王有也。故漢王敬使使臣進愚計，願大王之留意也。50

The two rhetorical questions in this speech perspicaciously pierced to the truth that Qing Bu did not fulfill a vassal’s responsibility to his master, which means that Qing Bu did not really entrust his state to Xiang Yu. Then Sui He told Qing Bu that it was superficial to only notice that Han was weak and Chu mighty. Instead, mighty Chu was not worth relying on and it would be defeated by the weaker Han in the end. Finally, Sui He said that Liu Bang had promised to divide up territory and enfeoff Qing Bu with it. It was difficult for Qing Bu to refute such impregnable arguments which combined threats with inducements.

The second that Sima Qian employed was the description of scenes. For example, when Sui He went to persuade Qing Bu to submit to Han, Qing Bu seemed to agree but took a wait-and-see attitude. Sui He read his mind and reacted accordingly:

When the envoy of Chu was there, having just urgently demanded that Ying Bu send out troops, he was housed in the post house. Sui He entered it directly, sat in a seat of more honor than that of the envoy of Chu, and said, “The King of Jiu-jiang has already been gone over to Han. How could Chu get him to send out troops?” [Ying] Bu was astounded. The envoy of chu left. He took advantage to advise Bu saying, “As the matter has already been concluded, you should now kill the Chu envoy, not allowing him to return [to Xiang Yu], and quickly run to Han to combine your strength.” Bu said, “As you, the envoy has instructed, I will accordingly raise troops to assault him [Xiang Yu].” At this, [Ying Bu] killed the envoy, and then raised troops to attack Chu.51

楚使者在，方急責英布發兵，舍傳舍。隨何直入，坐楚使者上坐，曰：

50 “Qing Bu liezhuan” in Shiji, pp. 2600-2601.
51 “Ch’ing Pu, Memoir 31”, In The Grand Scribe's Records, Vol. 8, p.52.
九江王已歸漢，楚何以得發兵？”布愕然。楚使者起。何因說布曰：“事已搆，可遂殺楚使者，無使歸，而疾走漢并力。”布曰：“如使者教，因起兵而擊之耳。”於是殺使者，因起兵而攻楚。52

It took only slightly more than 110 characters to portray vividly the tense moment and Sui He’s tremendous wisdom and courage.

The last strategy was the description of details. Sima Qian always delineates the scenes with exact verbs. For example: 1) Master Dong intercepted the King of Han (i.e. Liu Bang) to tell him about the causes of Yidi’s death; 2) Chen Hui climbed over the wall and went to see Magistrate Pei (i.e. Liu Bang); 3) When Xiao He was promoted more, all the vassals congratulated him on the extreme imperial favor except Shao Ping who regarded the favor as a bad omen of disasters “諸君皆賀，召平獨吊” (because it proves Liu Bang start to suspect him). Despite the limited delineation of those advisors, they impress the audience with their strong points.

IV A Concise Conclusion

The investigation of these subsidiary advisors in the Shiji allows us to penetrate many a problem during the Chu-Han period as well as to further appreciate Sima Qian’s outstanding writing skills: Liu Bang was good at accept all the beneficial suggestions from advisors, even the unknown ones, who were treated by Liu Bang very well so that he succeeded finally. Favorable relationship between Liu and his advisors contributed to the victory of Han. On the contrary, Xiang Yu was too stubborn to follow the suggestions from his advisors, even for Fang Zeng’s. The contantious relationship between Xiang Yu and his advisors foreshadowed his failure. In the same way, Zhang Er’s success or Xiao He’s escape from the death cannot exclude the advice from their advisors. However, Chen Yu’s death or Han Xin’s tragedy was mainly due to their failure to take

52 “Qing Bu liezhuan” in Shiji, pp. 2601-2602.
advice from their advisors. Sima Qian described these subsidiary advisors through their speech full of wisdom, description of lovely scenes and interesting details in different biographies in the *Shiji*. 