

The Biography of Lü Buwei
From *The Historical Records* by Sima Qian
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Lü Buwei — a man from a great family of Yangzhai.¹ Through buying cheap and selling dear, his family accumulated thousands in gold.

In the fortieth year of the reign of King Zhau² of Qin, the crown prince died. In the forty-second year of his reign, he appointed his second son, the Lord of Anguo, as crown prince.³

The Lord of Anguo had more than twenty sons. He [also] had a much beloved concubine. He established her as his legal consort and gave her the title Lady of Huayang. The Lady of Huayang had no children.

Among the sons of the Lord of Anguo was one named Chu. Chu's mother was named Concubine Xia. The Lord of Anguo did not favor her.

Prince Chu was an exchange hostage for Qin in Zhao. Qin frequently attacked Zhao, so consequently Zhao did not treat Chu with much courtesy.

Prince Chu was a descendant of the Qin [royal line] but the son of a concubine. When he was exchanged to the nobles, he was given few chariots and his stipend was small. His living conditions were poor and he was not content.

Lü Buwei went on a business trip in Handan⁴. He saw Prince Chu and pitied him,

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- 1 This formatting is somewhat inventive, as there is, of course, no punctuation in the original text. It is intended to suggest the formulaic nature of the opening of *Shiji* biographies, which quickly describe the name and background of the person being written about.
 - 2 This name should properly be spelled “Zhao.” I have spelled it this way to distinguish the King of Qin (King Zhau) from the neighboring state (the state of Zhao).
 - 3 Tsai-fa Chen *et al.* (Indiana University Press, 1994) note that there is no known area in Qin called Anguo, and they suggest that this may be a descriptive title (“the lord who pacifies the state”). To avoid having to frequently use such a mouthful of a title, he is called the Lord of Anguo in this translation.
 - 4 The capital of the state of Zhao.

saying "This is a rare good which can be gathered up."⁵ Therefore he went to see Prince Chu and said to him: "I can bring greatness to your house."

Prince Chu laughingly said, "First work to make your own house great, then [worry about] bringing greatness to my house."

Lü Buwei said, "Although you don't know it, my house will serve your house and thereby be made great." Chu knew in his heart that what [he had] said was true, so he drew [Lü Buwei] to sit with him and talk deeply.

Lü Buwei said: "The King of Qin is aged, and the Lord of Anguo has succeeded in being named crown prince. I have learned that the Lord of Anguo dearly loves the Lady of Huayang, and that the Lady of Huayang is childless. The one who can establish the legitimate successor is none other than the Lady of Huayang. Now, you have more than twenty brothers, among whom you are in the middle, and are not perceived as being favored. Some time ago you were exchanged for a nobleman. When the King dies, the Lord of Anguo will be established as King. Then you will have no hope in your contention with the elder sons, because you will have no way to contend with those sons who are even a day older than you."

Prince Chu said: "So true! This being so, what then [should we do]?"

Lü Buwei said: "Since you are poor, and you are being treated in this manner, you don't have the wherewithal to give presents to companions and to make relations with retainers. Although I, Buwei, am poor, I will take a thousand pieces of gold⁶ and to travel west on your behalf, where by serving the Lord of Anguo and the Lady of Huayang [I will

5 The word 居 could be more literally translated as "hoarded," but the translation given here better captures the implication of the mercantile proverb, i.e. that the rare goods will be profitable.

6 This mention of riches appears inconsistent with Lü Buwei's profession of poverty a moment before. That declaration of being not wealthy should be seen as entirely *pro forma*; Lü Buwei is in fact an extremely wealthy man.

get] you established as the legitimate successor.”

Prince Chu bowed his head and said: “If it goes as you have planned, permit me to divide Qin and share it [with you].”

Lü Buwei then gave five hundred pieces of gold to Chu, so that he could [properly] entertain guests and attract retainers. With another five hundred pieces of gold he bought rare objects of luxury. He himself traveled west to Qin. He sought the elder sister of the Lady of Huayang, to respectfully present her with his rare objects of luxury to curry favor with the Lady of Huayang. She spoke of Chu as a worthy and wise person, and entertained lords from everywhere under Heaven, always saying: “Prince Chu considers the Lady [of Huayang] as Heaven. Day and night he weeps to think of her and the crown prince.” The Lady [of Huayang] was delighted.

Buwei caused her sister to say: “I have heard this: as for those who use beauty to serve men, when their beauty wanes, the love [for them] slackens. Now Your Ladyship is serving the crown prince. He loves you greatly – but you are childless. Why don't you take this moment to choose among all the sons one who is worthy and filial, pick him [out] and establish him as successor and son. Then Your Ladyship will be greatly respected, and after your husband has lived out his hundred years⁷, the [son] you adopted will be King and as a result you will not lose influence. This is what is called 'From one word [comes] benefit lasting for ten thousand generations.' If you don't, while your beauty is in full flower, establish [your] roots, then after your beauty wanes and [his] love slackens, even if you want to say something [to help yourself], then how could you do it?

“Now, Chu is worthy and he knows himself to be in the middle [of the line of succession]. As he is not due to be appointed as successor, he will attach himself to Your

⁷ i.e. when he dies.

Ladyship and be dependent on you. If you really raise him up to appoint him as successor, then Your Ladyship will be established as consort in Qin until the end of your days.”

The Lady of Huayang thought that [her elder sister] was right, and when she chanced to find the crown prince in a moment of leisure, she began at once to casually mention how Prince Chu, the exchange hostage in Zhao, was praised by everyone in their comings and goings. Thereupon she [began to] cry and said: “I, your wife, am fortunate to be kept in the rear palace; but unhappily, I have borne no sons. I wish to appoint Chu as the heir and legitimate successor, and to adopt Chu as a son in my line.” The Lord of Anguo agreed to it, so together they had a jade tally carved as a contract to appoint [Prince Chu as] successor.

The Lord of Anguo with his wife sent lavish presents to Chu, and they asked Lü Buwei to teach him. As a consequence of this, the praise of Prince Chu's name became increasingly widespread among the nobility.

Lü Buwei chose from among the beautiful and skilled concubines in Handan one who was especially skilled in dancing. Lü Buwei knew her and she became pregnant. Chu was drinking with Buwei when he saw her, and he delighted in her. He stood up to toast to Lü Buwei's long life, and then asked for her.

Lü Buwei grew angry, but he considered that he had already destroyed his own family for the sake of Prince Chu, and he [still] wished to ensnare this rare thing. So to [keep Chu] satisfied, he presented the concubine to him. The concubine hid her pregnancy, and when she arrived at her due time, she gave birth to a son [named] Zheng. Prince Chu named the concubine as his legal consort.

In the fiftieth year of his reign, King Zhao of Qin ordered Wang Yi to surround Handan. The situation was urgent and Zhao prepared to kill Prince Chu. Chu and Lü Buwei schemed and bought off [his] guards with six hundred pieces of gold, and they fled from Handan to find the army of Qin, and with them to return [home].

Zhao wanted to kill Chu's wife and child. But Prince Chu's consort was from one of Zhao's leading families, so they managed to hide the wife and child, and consequently both survived.

In the fifty-sixth year of his reign, King Zhao of Qin died. The crown prince the Lord of Anguo ascended the throne, and the Lady of Huayang was named Queen. Chu was named crown prince, and Zhao sent his consort and Prince Zheng back to Qin with due ceremony.

In the first year of his reign, the King of Qin died.⁸ His posthumous title was the Filial and Cultured Monarch. The crown prince Chu was then enthroned and named the Zhuangxiang Monarch. His adoptive mother Queen Huayang was named Royal Mother Huayang.⁹ His real mother Concubine Xia was given the honorary title Royal Mother Xia. In the initial year of his reign, the Zhuangxiang Monarch appointed Lü Buwei as Deputy Minister, and titled him the Cultured and Loyal Baron, with a fief of one hundred thousand houses around Luoyang, in Henan.

The Zhuangxiang Monarch died suddenly in the third year of his reign, and the crown prince Zheng ascended the throne. Out of respect for Lü Buwei, he appointed him

⁸ In fact the Filial and Cultured Monarch died on the third day of his reign. In keeping with Chinese custom, the crown prince Chu did not officially ascend the throne until the beginning of the next year.

⁹ There are three women referred to by this term (太后) in the biography of Lü Buwei: Chu's real mother, Concubine Xia; his adoptive mother, the Lady of Huayang; and the consort from Lü Buwei's entourage who becomes the mother of the First Emperor. Tsai-fa Cheng *et al.* translate this term in all cases as "Queen Dowager." However, the term "Dowager" refers to a widow. The designation 太后 here seems to refer to a woman who has given birth to a King (or an heir to the throne). Thus I have chosen to translate the term as "Royal Mother."

Prime Minister. He [also] gave him the title "Second Father."

When the King of Qin was young, the Royal Mother regularly had secret assignations with Lü Buwei. [During this time] Buwei's household [increased to include] more than ten thousand servants.

At that time, Wei had the Lord of Xinling; Chu had the Lord of Chunshen; Zhao had the Lord of Pingyuan; Qi had the Lord of Mengchang, and they all went down [among their] knights and delighted their guests, to compete with one another. Lü Buwei [felt that] Qin's might was so great that it was shamed [by their lack of knights, so he] sent for knights and treated them with great friendship, until he was providing for three thousand men. At that time among the nobility there were many persuaders, like the followers of Minister Xun,¹⁰ whose books were circulated everywhere under Heaven.

Lü Buwei thereupon made his retainers write down everything that they heard, and edited it¹¹ [to produce] the Eight Surveys, the Six Discourses and the Twelve Records.¹² Altogether it exceeded two hundred thousand words. He took it to provide complete information about Heaven and earth, about the myriad things, from ancient times into the present day. It was named *The Annals of Master Lü*. He posted it on the gate of the marketplace in Xianyang, hanging one thousand pieces of gold above it, inviting nobles and wandering knights to try to add or subtract a single character; [any who] could do so would get the thousand pieces of gold.

As the First Emperor got older, the Royal Mother's licentiousness did not cease. Lü Buwei feared that the disaster would reach him, so he sought out a man with a big

10 Xun Kuang (310? - 220? BCE) was a prominent Confucian philosopher.

11 The term 論, used here as the object of 集, must be distinguished from the more specific meaning of 論 as 'discourse' (e.g. in the Six Discourses) which occurs later in the same sentence.

12 These terms are taken from the translation by Tsai-fa Cheng *et al.*

penis [named] Lao Ai, and took him into his household. He would regularly have entertainment with singing girls, and he made Ai put his penis through a hole in a wooden wheel, and go about like that. He caused the Royal Mother to hear about it, relying on it to intrigue the Royal Mother. The Royal Mother heard [about Lao Ai] and wanted to secretly get [him for herself]. Lü Buwei thereupon presented Lao Ai, and caused one of his men to falsely accuse him of a crime punishable by castration. Buwei secretly consulted with the Royal Mother and said to her: “It would be possible to fake his castration, and then he could serve you within [the palace].”

Thereupon the Royal Mother secretly befriended the official in charge of castrations, who pretended [to castrate Lao Ai according to his] sentence, and plucked out his eyebrows and beard as if he were a eunuch. Then he was able to serve the Royal Mother.

The Royal Mother had a secret affair with him, and greatly loved him. She became pregnant, and feared that people would know of it, so she falsified a divination that it was a proper time for her to seclude herself, and [using that excuse she] left the palace to reside at Yong. Lao Ai always accompanied her. He was given many gifts of great value, and he decided all of [her] affairs. The servants in Lao Ai's household numbered several thousand, and over a thousand courtiers seeking patrons sought to become retainers of Lao Ai.

In the seventh year of the reign of the First Emperor, Royal Mother Xia, the mother of the Zhuangxiang Monarch, died. The Queen of the Filial and Cultured Monarch, called the Lady of Huayang, was buried next to the Filial and Cultured Monarch at Shouling. The Zhuangxiang Monarch, son of Royal Mother Xia, was buried at

Zhiyang. Therefore Royal Mother Xia was buried by herself at Dudong. She [had] said: “On the east I gaze on my son, on the west I gaze on my husband. In one hundred years, a city of ten thousand houses will be at my side.”

In the ninth year of the reign of the First Emperor, someone reported that Lao Ai was actually not a eunuch, that he was always having improper relations with the Royal Mother, that she had borne two sons and hidden everything, and that he had plotted with the Royal Mother, saying “When the king dies, we can establish our son as heir.”¹³

On this basis the King of Qin sent clerks [to investigate], and completely obtained the facts of the matter. The affair was tied to Prime Minister Lü Buwei. In the ninth month, the King exterminated Lao Ai's three degrees of relation, killed the two sons borne by the Royal Mother, and then sent the Royal Mother to Yong. All of those in the household of Lao Ai lost their own households and were sent to Shu. The King intended to execute the Prime Minister, but because of his talented service to the former King, and the retainers and persuaders who spoke on his behalf, the King could not bear to execute the law.

In the tenth month of the tenth year of the King of Qin, he dismissed Prime Minister Lü Buwei. After Mao Jiao, a man from Qi, spoke with the King of Qin, the King [went to] meet the Royal Mother at Yong, then sent her back to Chengyang and sent the Cultured and Loyal Baron away to [his estate] in Henan.

After more than a year, the road swelled with nobles seeking the Cultured and Loyal Baron. The King of Qin was afraid of a rebellion, so he sent a letter to the Cultured and Loyal Baron, saying: “What did you ever accomplish in Qin? Yet Qin has granted you a fief in Henan with more than one hundred thousand households. What relation do

¹³ Literally “descendant,” i.e. to the royal line.

you have with [the royal family of] Qin? Yet you are called 'Second Father.' You and your family must move to Shu!”

Lü Buwei calculated that he would be persecuted, and he was afraid that he would be executed, so he drank poison and died. After those who had angered the King of Qin – [namely] Lü Buwei and Lao Ai – were all dead, all those of Lao Ai's family who had been sent to Shu were sent back home.

In the nineteenth year of the First Emperor, the Royal Mother died. She then was awarded the title Imperial Mother, and was buried with the Zhuangxiang Monarch at Zhiyang.

The Grand Historian says: Buwei raised up Lao Ai, and was himself entitled the Cultured and Loyal Baron. Whenever people spoke about Lao Ai, Ai heard about it. The King of Qin inquired with those around him, but nothing came out [about it. When the King] went to perform a ritual at Yong, Ai feared that a disaster was about to occur. He plotted with his faction and forged the Royal Mother's seal to produce documents with which to incite a rebellion at Qi'nian Palace. [The King] ordered an attack on Ai, who fled until he was captured and executed at Haochi. Then his whole lineage was exterminated. And Lü Buwei's disgrace began at that point. What Confucius called a “noted” person -- was Prince Lü not such a person?