

HEAVENLY KHAN

A Biography of
Tang Taizong (Li Shimin)

a historical novel

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To the Memory of
Brigid Keogh (1909—2007),
Educator, philanthropist, and missionary

HEAVENLY KHAN

Contents

Author's Note	i
Part I. Quest for the Throne (613–626)	1
Part II. The Good Government of Zhenguan (627–643)	93
Part III. Last War (643–650)	191
Bibliography	237
Chronology	238
Glossary	241

List of Illustrations

Fig. 1. Tang Chang'an (Sui Daxing City)	iii
Fig. 2. Sui Luoyang	iv
Map 1. Tang China in the Early Seventh Century	v
Map 2. Advance of the Righteous Army in 617	24
Map 3. Battle of Zhezhi City (618)	46
Map 4. War Against Liu Wuzhou and Song Jingang (619–620)	56
Map 5. War Against Dou Jiande (620–621)	62
Map 6. Northeast China and Koguryŏ in 645	207

Author's Note

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to those who made the writing of this book possible.

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This book is a historical fiction. But it is essentially based on traditional historical sources. Although challenged by modern scholars in a few areas, these sources are highly reliable. Readers interested in the history of the period in question are referred to the modern studies in the Bibliography.

During Sui-Tang times, the Chinese had no concept of minutes or weeks. Traditionally, a day was divided into 12 instead of 24 sections. Nonetheless, I use such temporal terms as “minutes,” “hours,” and “weeks” for the benefit of the reader.

The traditional Chinese calendar was a lunisolar calendar and was approximately one month behind the Julian-Gregorian Calendar. In this book, I normally use Julian-Gregorian Calendar dates. When Chinese dates are given, they are expressed in ordinal numbers (e.g.: the 1st day of the 2nd month).

The traditional Chinese way of counting age regards a person at birth as one year old and adds one more year on the first New Year's Day. Thus, an age recorded in a traditional source is one to almost two years older than the real age. In this book, I convert recorded ages to approximate *real ages* by deducting one year.

In Western literature, China is sometimes referred to as the “Middle Kingdom” (*zhongguo*). To avoid confusion with its use associated with Ancient Egypt, I replace it with the “Central Kingdom.”

The only traditional unit of measurement used in this book is *li*, which varied slightly from the first to the second reigns of the Sui, and from Sui to Tang, and is roughly equivalent to half a kilometer or slightly shorter than one third of a mile.

Place names are usually traditional ones followed by their modern equivalents in parentheses where necessary. However, in the case of large geographical regions, modern place names are sometimes used (Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Manchuria, and such like) instead of their Sui-Tang equivalents. Some Sui-Tang region names in this book such as Henan, Hebei, and Shandong have survived into present-day usage, but the areas they covered in Sui-Tang times were larger and less well defined than their modern namesakes.

Part I. Quest for the Throne

(613–626)

1. The War of Daye 9

One morning in March, Daye 9 (613), the Emperor Yang Guang was holding court in the assembly hall of the Daye Basilica in Luoyang the Eastern Capital. The soft-skinned, middle-aged sovereign was sitting on a yellow silk throne, behind an agarwood low table and beneath a yellow ornate baldachin. The throne was positioned atop a raised marble dais above two flights of stairs at the northern end of the commodious hall.

In a stately but factual tone, the Emperor spoke for about half an hour, paused to stare ruefully into the vaulted ceiling a few moments, and continued in a raised, irritated voice, “The Koguryŏ are inferior barbarians. Still, they have humiliated our superior state. If we so desire, we can pull up the Eastern Sea and remove Mount Tai, to say nothing of crushing these small-time bandits. We *must* launch another expedition against them.”

The audience—the leading civil officials and top military commanders of the Sui Empire—listened in awe.

“This time,” He resumed, “I will lead in person.”

Silence gripped the hall briefly before a high-pitched, feeble voice began to speak from the audience: “Your Majesty, in my humble opinion, the Koguryŏ bandits are not strong enough to withstand another assault by our mighty army.”

It was Yuwen Tai. Well past 70, he had an emaciated face and tall stature, and carried himself with a military bearing. As one of the key commanding officers in the

War of Daye 8 (612), Yuwen had been brought back to Luoyang in chains after the war had ended in ignominious defeat for the Sui. Only recently had he been reinstated by the Emperor.

“Your Majesty,” Yuwen Shu continued, “it would be hard to imagine that any foreign power would be foolish enough to challenge the might of the Sui Empire with her more than 1 million men under arms. Least of all little Koguryŏ, a country about the size of a Sui Commandery with a tiny military.”

“We concur,” several in the crowd said.

Others remained silent except for an elderly-looking man of stout physique, who said, “However, our Central Kingdom has yet to fully recover from the War of Daye 8. Furthermore, one does not shoot a rat with a bow of a thousand pounds. How can the sovereign of our country, one of ten thousand chariots, condescend to fight such a pitiful enemy in person?”

“I appreciate your frankness and loyalty, Mr. Guo Rong. But my plan is to bring an overwhelming force to bear against Koguryŏ, and force her into submission by fear without much of an engagement.”

Addressing the entire audience, the Emperor asked, almost rhetorically, “I suppose there is no more objection?”

When no one spoke a word, He declared, “Preparations for the Daye-9 War against Koguryŏ start now.”

The Koguryŏ were an ancient Korean people. They founded their first state in 37 BCE. By the time of the late Sui, Koguryŏ had become by far the most dominant power of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, with a territory that took up much of Manchuria and most of the Korean Peninsula.

In antiquity, after the Zhou conquest of the Shang around 1045 BCE, a member of the Shang royal family, Jizi (Kija), was enfeoffed in north Korea. Almost 1000 years later, Emperor Wu of the Western Han set up four Commanderies in the Korean Peninsula and southern Manchuria in 108 BCE. These records provided a ready rationale for later Chinese sovereigns to engage in aggressive action.

But oftentimes, the invading sovereign was actuated by more immediate reasons. When the Emperor Yang Jian (Yang Guang’s father) launched the first Sui invasion in 598, He wanted to rein in the defiant Koguryŏ sovereign, who had attempted to form an alliance with the Tujue (a nomadic people north of China proper), which was regarded as a threat to the Sui Empire’s security. When the Emperor Yang Guang launched the Daye-8 (612) and Daye-9 (613) Wars, He was driven by an ambition to surpass His father.

Built on a vantage point, the parallelogram-shaped Liaodong City (Liaoyang, Liaoning), the westernmost Koguryŏ urban center of importance, was

circumvallated with a ring of tall walls and a massive moat. It had a total of four city gates, each with its own gatetower—a two-storied structure with embrasures atop the wall—and a watchtower towering over the gatetower. With hills and mountains to its north and east and rolling fields and woodlands to its south and west, this strongly fortified city seemed impregnable.

But the Emperor Yang Guang, who had just arrived at the Liaodong front, had no intention of altering his invasion plan adopted at Luoyang (Luoyang, Henan) one month earlier. To maximize His chances of success, He mobilized a large expeditionary army comprised of three columns. The first column, placed under His direct command, had as its immediate target Liaodong City. The second column—the main force led by His top generals Yuwen Shu and Yang Yichen—was to march east across the Yalu River. The third column, comprised of naval forces, was to cross the sea from the eastern tip of the Shandong Peninsula to land in the eastern suburb of Pyongyang. The second and third columns would coordinate an attack on that city from the north and the east.

As the battle for Liaodong City—the first major engagement in the Daye-9 War—began in earnest, the Emperor launched a day-and-night assault on this Koguryŏ outpost from four directions. A whole range of missile weapons and siege devices were deployed, including arbalests, catapults, mangonels, battering rams, and scaling ladders. Even sapping was attempted; but it was soon abandoned for lack of progress—the protective moat was simply too deep.

For 23 days, the Koguryŏ defenders held their ground.

Under the protection of Sui archers, thousands of conscripted laborers and construction soldiers began to frantically raise an earthwork close to the city wall. Despite constant enemy harassment, the “Long Ridge”—30-foot wide and as high as the city wall—was erected in two days with more than a million sacks of soil. Meanwhile half a dozen “Eight-wheelers”—mobile assault towers on wheels rising above the city wall—were slowly hauled to the front.

With crack archers deployed on the Ridge and the Eight-wheelers providing cover, the Sui forces launched another round of attacks early the next morning. By the late afternoon, the city defenders began to show signs of weakening, as the Sui commandos were breaking through one of the four city gates and breaching the city wall in two places.

Then, suddenly, the attack came to a halt—the field commanders had just received an urgent edict to abandon the entire operation.

On the night of July 20, the Sui forces beat a disorderly retreat, leaving behind a mountain of materiel. Campaign tents and bunkers that had not been dismantled stood eerily still, silhouetted against glowing campfires scattered across the field.

The Emperor’s decision to withdraw had not been made lightly. It was prompted by a secret dispatch from the interior concerning an armed revolt in the

Central Plain. It was led by Yang Xuangan, then President of the Board of Rites, who had been in charge of storing grain in Liyang (near Xunxian, north Henan, southeast of Anyang) and of transporting it to the Koguryŏ front. His rebellious action had cut off much of the grain supply to the Sui forces on the front, and posed an imminent threat to the Eastern Capital—Luoyang, in the heart of the Central Plain. Even worse, scores of sons of senior court officials and military commanders had joined him. This had left the Emperor no other choice.

The sudden departure of the Sui army left the beleaguered Koguryŏ defenders puzzled. For fear that a trap might await them, they did not give chase until two days later. By then the Emperor's main force was already inside Sui territory. It was near the Liao River that the pursuing Koguryŏ forces caught up with the rear of the Sui army, and launched an assault, killing a couple of thousands, mostly of the weak and feeble.

At the start of the Daye-9 War, almost the entire top brass of the army and all the leading court officials, regardless of rank or status, had gone north to Hebei or Liaodong (with the exception of a naval contingent that had gone to Shandong). One of them was Duke of Tang, Li Yuan, a most privileged member of the ruling elite. Now that the war was over, he joined hundreds of thousands of Sui officers and men in moving in the opposite direction to Luoyang.

Although already in the autumn of his life at 47, Li Yuan was in excellent physical form, which clearly distinguished him from most of his similar-age compeers often plagued by a variety of chronic ailments. Nonetheless, the screeching of the wooden wheels of ox-carts and horse-drawn carriages, and the thudding of hooves racked his nerves; and the continuous jolting of his own mount upset his stomach. More seriously, he felt constantly oppressed by a sense of melancholy. The pervasive low troop morale did not help; and a recent personal mishap had left him in a deep state of depression. During the war, his beautiful Xianbei wife, Ms. Dou, who had born him four sons and a daughter and whom he loved and respected, had followed him all the way to Zhuo Commandery (north Hebei). But due to harsh war conditions, she had contracted a disease and succumbed at age 44.

Li Yuan had been assigned to Huaiyuan Garrison (based in Liaozhong, Liaoning) to manage the flow of grain to the front. Although lower in rank than Yang Xuangan he had served in the war in a similar capacity. Now the war had ended abruptly and Luoyang was under attack, Li Yuan was unsure of what lay in wait for him once the long trek south was over.

The uncertainty of the journey was eventually resolved by the announcement of an Imperial envoy: Li Yuan was to turn west and proceed to a remote destination—Honghua Commandery (based in Qingyang, Gansu)—to take up appointment as its

Commander with the responsibility to supervise the civil and military affairs of 13 northwestern Commanderies including Honghua.

Traditionally, a Commandery (*jun*) had been the intermediate-level local government between Prefecture (*zhou*) and County. Under the Sui, initially, this intermediate level was abolished. Only Prefectures (*zhou*) and Counties (*xian*) remained. But under the second sovereign, Yang Guang, “Prefectures” were renamed as “Commanderies.” Thus in terms of power and prestige, a Commandery Governor under Yang Guang was the same as a Prefect of the first reign. Li Yuan’s appointment, although provincial, was quite an important one, and gave him reason to look forward to a career full of challenge, responsibility, and reward.

2. Yang Xuangan

While growing up in Daxing City as a “noble brat,” Yang Xuangan was surrounded by power and privilege. His father Yang Su, until his death in 606, was the highest-ranking officer at court. His Yang clan, though not directly related to the royal house, acquired so much power that even the Emperor felt threatened and expressed His desire for its elimination. In fact, the Emperor’s threat was one of the main reasons why Yang Xuangan had started his rebellion.

However, having raised a large army, Yang Xuangan was unsure of what to do next. So he consulted Li Mi, a fellow nobleman in his early 30s who had just arrived from Guanzhong. Li Mi was a magnanimous and charismatic character, and most important, a talented strategist.

“I have three strategies for you,” Li Mi said, his eyes sparkling with excitement. “The first and best strategy: move north into Ji (based in Beijing) to coordinate a two-pronged attack against the Sui main force with the Koguryŏ, while using our rich grain supply to win over enemy officers and soldiers. In less than 10 days, we can prevail. We will then launch a southern expedition and conquer all under Heaven.

“The second strategy: make a bee-line for Guanzhong to take the capital Daxing City (Chang’an). While there we can rely on the surrounding natural barriers for protection and easily invade and dominate the Central Plain in the east. Of all the key areas in the realm, Guanzhong, no doubt, is of the greatest strategic importance.

“The third and least effective strategy: capture the Eastern Capital (Luoyang) nearby and use it as a military stronghold against the Sui forces. It will not guarantee a long-term success, because the Luoyang area is not really defensible.”

Pausing to contemplate his options for a long while, Yang Xuangan responded, “In fact, your last strategy is my best one. Because the close relatives of the senior court officials all live in Luoyang, its fall will be a devastating blow to enemy morale.”

Having thus made up his mind, Yang Xuangan moved south to lay siege to the Eastern Capital. While his troops were still forming a circle around the city, he

ordered a general assault. His men soon penetrated the Outer City and started attacking the Palace City (or the Palace-Imperial City) in the northwest corner of Luoyang, the last part of the city still firmly in Sui hands.

But the unexpected arrival of Sui reinforcements forced Yang Xuangan to abandon the attack and retreat west.

It was then that he decided to adopt Li Mi's second strategy: advance on Guanzhong. But it was too late. Constantly pursued by hostile forces, his army suffered horrendous casualties and disintegrated along the way. And his himself was seriously wounded.

Eventually, Yang Xuangan and his younger brother, having lost their chargers, fled on foot to a small township east of the Tong Pass, where they took refuge in an abandoned farm cottage.

Having been placed on a pallet, Yang Xuangan said beseechingly, "Dear younger brother, I want you to do one more thing."

"Yes, brother."

"Kill me! Kill me now!"

The younger brother, who had always obeyed his elder brother, asked, in stupefaction, "Why?"

"I don't want to be insulted in a public execution."

The brother sat wordless for a while until he heard the thudding of hooves in the distance. He hefted his broadsword to deliver the *coup de grace* before turning it on himself.

When the Sui pursuers found the Yang brothers weltering in blood, the elder one was already dead and the younger one barely alive. They brought both back to Luoyang. The younger Yang was beheaded in public, and the corpse of Yang Xuangan was carried to the city's main market, Fengdu, where it was ceremoniously "fifthed," that is, pulled apart by five horses going in five different directions. His body parts were then chopped up, burned, and scattered.

By then a nationwide campaign had been underway to hunt down Yang's followers. The law-enforcers taking their cue from the Emperor cast a wide web to capture as many accomplices and sympathizers as they could.

As this reign of terror spread, most court officials began to feel the heat. Li Yuan was no exception. But people around him knew that he had no need to worry, being the Emperor's maternal first cousin (their mothers were blood sisters). Besides, one of his nieces Lady Wang was a favored Imperial concubine. Since he had never been close to Yang Xuangan in the first place, it was almost impossible to charge him with culpability by association, a fanciful crime that had brought down many an official. Moreover, his recent appointment seemed to confirm the Emperor's trust.

A man of gregarious temperament, Li Yuan had made many friends, mostly officials and local luminaries. But cautious by nature, Li Yuan did not want to make a

wrong move and arouse His Majesty's suspicion. So when in the company of friends and acquaintances, he always refrained from voicing his views on court politics.

In summer, when the Emperor descended on His favorite summer resort, the Fenyang Palace north of Taiyuan, He requested key local officials in the region including Li Yuan to appear in the main basilica of the Palace for a semi-formal gathering. Li Yuan, still recovering from a recent illness, was too weak to make the journey. So he sent a message to His Majesty to apologize for his reluctant absence.

Several days later, Li received a secret message from the Fenyang sent by Lady Wang, which described the Emperor's reaction. As expected He was displeased with Li Yuan's absence. But instead of flying into a rage, He simply asked: "So that uncle of yours is a no-show because of illness? Oh, is he going to die?"

The fact that His Majesty used the much-tabooed d-word did not seem to bode well. For days, Li Yuan was tormented by the fear of arousing Imperial suspicion. He stopped granting audiences to fellow officials and local big shots, and instead whiled away the time in the company of young female courtesans, who were his drinking companions, conversation partners, entertainers, and bedmates.

3. Li Min and Li Hong

During the Daye-9 war, only a few senior officers were allowed to stay behind in the Two Capitals: Daxing City and Luoyang. One of them was Acting General-in-chief of the Encampment Guard Li Min. His main responsibility in Daxing was to safeguard the city proper, particularly the palace area known as the Palace City. The fact that he was appointed to this vital post had much to do with his intimate connections with the Yang Imperial house. His granduncle Li Mu was a founding elder of the Sui, whose backing of Yang Jian—Yang Guang's father—was crucial for the successful founding of the dynasty. His father, as Commander of Youzhou Command in the northeast, had laid down his life defending the Empire against a Tujue (ancient Turkish) raid. To show His gratitude, the Emperor Yang Jian brought the young Li Min, known his family as "Hong," into the Palace, where he was raised until majority.

In the 6th year of Kaihuang (Inaugural Sovereign) (586), when Li Min was about 20, the Emperor issued an unusual rescript that scandalized Daxing's noble society: All unmarried young noblemen were to take part in a contest to compete for the hand of Yuwen Êying, His favorite granddaughter. The mastermind behind the rescript was little Êying herself. At the ripe age of 12, Êying was the hottest catch in Daxing. She had resisted the "normal" way of spouse selection—matchmaking—which would allow the grownups to select a middle-aged man of power on her behalf, and insisted on having a hand in picking her own helpmate.

Êying was the only daughter of Yang Lihua and the Northern Zhou Emperor Yuwen Yun (Emperor Xuan). Under the Northern Zhou prior to the Sui, Êying's

maternal grandfather Yang Jian was a top-ranking court official. After coming to the throne in 578, her father Yuwen Yun began to behave in an increasingly bizarre manner. He threatened to execute her grandpa and repeatedly abused her mother. One of the most serious grudges Yuwen Yun held against His wife was perhaps her inability to produce an heir. After Yuwen Yun passed away in His 20s, Yang Jian seized the throne and founded His own Sui dynasty (581).

Charming, clever, and strong-willed, little Êying was pampered beyond reason by her mother and grandpa. And it did not take long for her naïve idea to win the nod of both. But many self-proclaimed adherents of Confucianism at court opposed it. Not only did the idea have no precedent, it ran counter to the fundamental principle of Confucian ritual propriety, they argued. But all to no avail. Yang Jian had nothing but contempt for the bookish Confucians.

On the day of the contest, young men from some of the best families in Daxing flocked to the suburban Hongsheng (Royal Sage) Palace where the princessling and her mother resided. In a basilica courtyard, one by one they showcased their artistic and martial skills. All this while the princessling watched surreptitiously from behind the thick dark window curtains of the basilica. Eventually, out of more than 100 suitors, Êying chose Li Min. And her choice won her mother's instant approval. Although a member of the elite Swordsmen Guard, Li held no official rank. Nonetheless, Êying was attracted to him because he was a good singer and a good dancer, and a master of such essential martial skills as archery, horse-riding, and weight-lifting. Besides, he had strikingly good looks, and graceful manners.

After the wedding Li Min moved into the Hongsheng Palace. As the husband of the Emperor Yang Jian's favorite granddaughter, he basked in Imperial favors. The Emperor granted him one of the highest prestige titles, the "Pillar of State," with a fief of 1,000 households (at the insistence of Êying's mother) to match. Upon ascending the throne, the Emperor Yang Guang continued to treat him well, increasing his fief to 5,000 households and promoting him to a top position in the prestigious Encampment Guard. During the Yang Xuangan Rebellion, Li Min had the walls of Daxing City thoroughly examined and repaired. That impressed Yang Guang so much that He appointed him Chief of the Directorate for the Palace Buildings (*jiangzuo jian*), the central government agency in charge of court construction projects.

Besides Li Min, there was another notable member of the Li clan who had been allowed to stay behind: his uncle General-in-chief of the Courageous Guard Li Hun. This good-looking man in his late 30s was noted especially for his beautiful whiskers and mustache. Not nearly as well connected as his nephew, Li Hun was nonetheless much richer. However, initially, he had been cut off from the family fortune, being the 10th son of the famous Li Mu. After Li Mu died in 586, his ducal

title and dukedom went to one of his grandsons, whose father, Li Mu's eldest son, had died early. When the grandson himself died in the early 600s, Li Hun saw an opportunity for himself. No one in the Li clan was nearly as qualified as he to inherit the title and dukedom, or so he thought. But he still had to convince the Emperor Yang Jian, who would make the ultimate decision in this matter. One person who could help was Yuwen Shu, his brother-in-law, known for his close ties to Crown Prince Yang Guang.

"Could you ask the Crown Prince to put in a good word for me with the Emperor?" Li Hun asked imploringly. "You helped him become heir presumptive. He owes you."

"I'm not sure if the Emperor will listen," Yuwen Shu said irresolutely.

"Yes, He will," averred Li Hun. "Nobody can have the ear of the Emperor like the Crown Prince."

Sensing his brother-in-law's reluctance, Li Hun made him a generous offer, saying, "If you can help me obtain my father's fiefdom, I'll go 50 and 50 with you on its revenue every year."

"All right, I'll see what I can do," Yuwen Shu said begrudgingly.

In less than a month, an Imperial edict was issued that appointed Li Hun as the bearer of his father's ducal title and the owner of his entire dukedom. Li Hun was pleasantly surprised to find that the dukedom was an enormous wealth generator. Reveling in his newfound riches, Li Hun seemed to have forgotten the offer he had made to Yuwen Shu, whose good offices were crucial in gaining the Imperial approval. On several occasions, Yuwen Shu discreetly reminded his brother-in-law of his promise. Each time Li Hun assured his benefactor that he would still make good on his offer, but never got round to actually doing it.

4. Peach Plum Master

After the Yang Xuangan Rebellion of 613, the political situation of the Empire greatly deteriorated. From the northeast to the northwest, from Guanzhong to Shandong, from the Central Plain to the Yangzi valley, the fire of rebellion was raging. The Emperor Yang Guang, who had succeeded His father Yang Jian in 604, was loath to hear reports of rebellion. Nonetheless, increasingly He had to face the reality that government efforts at suppression had been by and large ineffectual. In the North, each of the more than half a dozen major rebel leaders commanded a force in excess of 100,000 and some of them had the support of the redoubtable Tujue further to the north. Recently, armed rebels were even sighted in the suburbs of Luoyang where the Emperor resided.

As worry about security increasingly occupied His attention, the Emperor began to take a greater interest in various auspicious and inauspicious omens, particularly

one that took the form of an enigmatic ditty, which had been making the rounds in the streets of Luoyang:

Peach Plum Master!
As the sovereign circles around Yangzhou,
He tosses and turns in the garden.
Stop talking nonsense! Who says so?

The Emperor had it sent to An Qieluo, one of a small group of elite theurgists hand-picked by the court to provide exclusive service to the throne. An Qieluo lived in “Daoshu,” a residential Ward in Luoyang set aside to house the royal occultists. There were 103 Wards inside the city. Each was like a mini-city, enclosed by four walls and regulated by curfew. But Daoshu was the only one guarded by Palace guardsmen and off-limits to ordinary city inhabitants. For the theurgists living inside, contact with the outside world was strictly forbidden. The Emperor was afraid that should their magic power lose its exclusivity, it would stop working.

The theurgist An Qieluo divined the future with a variety of techniques: Yin-Yang and Five Phases, tortoise-viewing, astrology, *Yijing*, *chen*-prognostication, and such like. Prior to the Daye-9 invasion of Koguryŏ, the Emperor had consulted him. Mr. An then observed the erratic movement of Mars in the third month that had overshadowed the sun in Tail (Wei) and Winnower (Ji) Stellar Lodges (*xiu*), both of which had Yan (in the northeast) as their “Allotted Field” on earth. So he predicted a major conflict in the area, but was ambiguous about the outcome. However, that was enough to convince the Emperor of his prophetic power.

The appearance of the Luoyang ditty could not have been more timely. There had been a recent solar eclipse that took place in Well (Jing) and Ghost (Gui) Stellar Lodges. Both Lodges shared the same Allotted Field on earth—Qin—where were located the main capital, Daxing, and the ancestral home of the Yang Imperial house. In the correlative cosmology of ancient China, the 28 celestial regions known as the Stellar Lodges (or Mansions) were scattered along the Zodiac and the ecliptic, and were matched with various provinces on earth known as “Allotted Fields.” Celestial events that took place in the Lodges would have a direct impact on their corresponding Fields down below and on people closely identified with them, and contrariwise.

Obviously, the recent solar event suggested that someone was posing a threat to the throne in Daxing. And the ditty provided the crucial corroborative evidence. So far efforts to reveal its full meaning, however, had not been very satisfying. While the second and third lines suggested that the Emperor would end up in the South (Yangzhou) where He would fall in a garden inside the Palace, the first and last lines seemed little more than prattle. By deploying the *chen*-prognostication technique,

which foretold the future through interpreting enigmatic texts or sayings, An Qieluo soon came up with a different reading. Therewith he came rushing to the Palace and was immediately granted an audience. When he entered the Imperial study inside the Daye Basilica, The Emperor had been waiting.

“So you’ve got something interesting?” the Emperor asked, at once impatient and expectant. “It’d better be good.”

An Qieluo replied, “Yes, your Majesty. I think I have deciphered the ditty. In the first line, *Tao li zi* (Peach Plum Master), the graph *tao* (plum) means ‘Taotang,’ the name of Yao (the first of the Three Sovereigns in far antiquity); the graphs *li* and *zi* together point to a certain Master Li. The whole ditty suggests that a man of extraordinary leadership ability from the Li clan will overthrow the throne.”

The Emperor was stunned, and asked, “Are there any countermeasures?”

“The only way to counter it is to exterminate *all* the males of the Li clan regardless of age.”

“That is impossible.” The so-called Li clan was one of the largest surname groups, with many clans, lineages, branches, and households.

Having sent the theurgist away, the Emperor asked his most trusted adviser Yuwen Shu, “What do you think of An’s work?”

“Well, it sounds plausible,” answered Yuwen. “But I can help your Majesty find out more about it.”

“How about Li Yuan?”

“He does have the physiognomy of a king. But...”

“But what?”

“He is your cousin.”

“Yes. But sons will kill fathers and brothers will kill each other when the throne is at stake.”

“Indeed. Should I keep a close watch on him, your Majesty?”

“Yes. But don’t disturb him yet.”

About a month later, the Emperor received the much-awaited confidential report from Honghua sent by a court agent who had secretly investigated Li Yuan’s activities. It turned out that Li had spent most of his days with young women of ill-repute, and neglected government business. Clearly he was blameworthy, but there was no sign of his involvement in a conspiracy. The Emperor was at once relieved and disappointed. Relieved that His cousin was not scheming against Him; disappointed that the throne-challenger was still at large.

Just as the memories of the unpleasant ditty were beginning to fade, the Emperor received another secret report, which read,

It is an open secret that His Majesty has been concerned with chen-prognostications lately. One of them is about Emperor Wen (Yang Jian), who dreamt about the old city of Chang'an (located to the immediate northwest of Daxing) being inundated by a deluge (hong). Li Min, whose pet name happens to be Hong, seems to be a match for the prognostication. After the "Peach Plum Master" ditty had begun to spread, it caught Li Min's attention. He and his supporters have formed a clique that aims at making him King in response to the ditty.

Intrigued, the Emperor called in its author, Yuwen Shu, for questioning. "Are you sure about this? Li Min—Êying's husband?"

"Absolutely, your Majesty," answered Yuwen Shu.

"Who else?"

"Li Hun."

"Your own brother-in-law?" the Emperor asked, beyond belief.

"For me, your subject, loyalty to the throne always trumps family ties. I do not enjoy doing this at all. But here is an exposé letter by Êying herself."

The Emperor took the letter from Yuwen Shu, and started reading,

...In a conspirators' meeting, Li Hun said to Li Min [her own husband], "You are the answer to the chen-prognostication, and must be the next Son of Heaven. Our current Emperor is a warmonger and has caused much grief to all under Heaven. If He starts another Koguryō campaign, you and I can use the opportunity to launch an uprising against the Sui. Together we can immediately raise an army of 50,000, of whom members of our Li clan can serve as commanders..."

At the end of the letter was the unmistakable seal of the princessling.

Visibly shaken, the Emperor held Yuwen Shu's hand and said, "Had it not been for you, Shu, the rule of the Imperial house would have been subverted."

Subsequently, an edict was issued whereby Li Min and Li Hun were summarily executed, as were all male members in the Three Clans of the two Lis—those in their father's generation, their own generation, and their succeeding generation. Between the two Li houses, a total of 32 men lost their lives while more distant relatives and dependent women were banished to the far south for life.

Li Min's wife, Êying, as the Emperor's niece, was allowed to live and stay in the Western Capital. But, with the death of her husband, she sank into a slough of despond. She was remorseful for having affixed her seal to the long document presented by Yuwen Shu, which had virtually become her husband's death warrant. A few months later, she received an Imperial rescript ordering her to end her own life, and she willingly carried it out by drinking poisoned wine.