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Figure Evaluation on the Tragedy of Prince Shensheng of Jin State in Spring and Autumn Era

Student name: Yushi Ye SID: 1902852 Date: 22 September 2023

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1. Introduction

The Spring and Autumn era (c.770–481 BCE) of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty is a special and important period in Chinese history. At that time, the Ritual of Zhou was still the mainstream civilization and education in society. But there were also lots of regicide and patricide that happened, and it was a period of ritual collapse.

Meanwhile, Jin state was a big state and located in the north of Central Plain. In 666–656 BCE, because of Liji's 驪姬 conspiracy, Prince Shensheng 申生 committed suicide in Quwo City 曲沃. *The Spring and Autumn Annals* 左傳 said, 'The fifth year of (Duke Xi of Lu) (655 BCE), in spring, Duke Xian of Jin killed his son, Prince Shensheng.'(五年，春，晉侯殺其世子申生) It is a tragedy. Not only for Jin State, for Duke Xian of Jin, but also for Prince Shensheng himselfe. So what was the story related to Prince Shensheng? Why should we call it a tragedy? And what is the figure evaluation on him? The article will explore as follows.

2. Overview of the story about Prince Shensheng

Duke Xian of Jin (676–651 BCE) was the nineteenth leader of the State of Jin and the second Duke of Jin. He reigned the Jin State for 26 years, and during his reign, the state of Jin was one of

the largest and most powerful states among other states in the Spring and Autumn Era. According to *Shi Ji* (*the Record of the Grand Historian* 史記), *Guo Yu* (*The Spring and Autumn Annals* and *the Record of Different States* 國語) and *The Spring and Autumn Annals* 左傳.¹ In the twenty-eighth years of Duke Zhuang of Lu (666 BCE), Duke Xian of Jin attacked Lirong 驪戎 (now Lintong County 臨潼縣, Shanxi Province 陝西省). Then Duke Xian of Jin captured a very beautiful woman called Liji 驪姬. Because of her beauty, she received special favour from Duke Xian. Then in spite of the ministers' remonstrance he crowned Li Ji as Furen (the wife of a feudal Duke 夫人).

The next year (665 BCE) Li Ji gave birth to a boy, named Xi Qi 奚齊. Because of Xi Qi, she slowly had more ambitions, to make her son a Prince. According to the records of *Guo Yu*, she consulted with her private lover—Shi You 施優, and decided to start her plans with Prince Shensheng first. As Shi You said, ‘Because Prince Shensheng is cautious and prudent, noble and unsullied, old-aged and decorous, and cannot bear to hurt others. For noble and unsullied, he can easily be humiliated. For not bear to hurt others, he will hurt himself.’ (其為人也，小心精潔，而大志重，又不忍人。精潔易辱，重債可疾，不忍人，必自忍也。辱之近行。)²

Li Ji's plans had three steps. The first one was ‘to lure tiger out of mountain’ (調虎離山). She bribed Liang Wu 梁五 and Bi Wu 嬖五 who were Duke Xian's favored officials. Then the two officials suggested that Duke Xian should arrange for Prince Shensheng to govern Quwo city 曲沃, Chong'er 重耳 to govern Pu city 蒲, and Yiwu 夷吾 to govern Qu city 屈. It can secure the

¹ Sima Qian 司馬遷, Annotation by Zhang shoujie 張守節, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), vol.39, p.1984-1989. Annotation by Zuo Qiuming 左丘明, Annotation by Du Yu 杜預, Commentary by Kong Yingda 孔穎達, Collated by Shisanjing zhushu zhengli weiyuanhui 十三經注疏整理委員會, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), vol.10, p.329-23, vol.11, p.348, 358-362. Annotation by Wei Zhao 韋昭, *Guo Yu* 國語 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), vol.7-8, p.252-292.

² Annotation by Wei Zhao 韋昭, *Guo Yu* 國語 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), vol.7, p.268.

borders of the state, establish its authority among the people, and make other states afraid to invade. Duke Xian was satisfied with this advice and agreed. However, he was also gradually estranged from his sons. So *Shi Ji* said, ‘Duke Xian of Jin had eight sons, and Prince Shensheng, Chong’er and Yiwu all were virtuous. But after Duke Xian married Liji, he was estranged from the three sons.’ (獻公子八人，而太子申生、重耳、夷吾皆有賢行。及得驪姬，乃遠此三子。)³

Li Ji’s second plan was ‘to do harm to someone through the hands of another’(借刀殺人). She took full advantage of ‘favour’ (Chong 寵) and ‘slandorous talk’ (chan 讒). Because Duke Xian favoured Li Ji and Xi Qi, he even had the idea of replacing the Prince. According to *Shi Ji*, Duke Xian told Li Ji in private, ‘I want to dethrone prince Shensheng, replacing with Xi Qi’ (吾欲廢太子，以奚齊代之。)⁴ Also, Li Ji played an innocent role. She always praised Prince Shensheng in public and private, but secretly let people speak ill of Prince Shensheng.

One night, she cried to Duke Xian and said, ‘Prince Shensheng is virtuous and kind to the people, and people follow him. Now all people think that you are captivated and confused by me. You should kill me, and not let the country be in chaos just because of me.’(吾聞申生甚好仁而強，甚寬惠而慈于民，皆有所行之。今謂君惑于我，必亂國，無乃以國故而行強于君。……盍殺我，無以一妾亂百姓。) She deliberately said irony, and Duke Xian certainly would not agree to kill her. However, she implied that Prince Shensheng would rebel and may kill his father—Duke Xian in the future. So what she said made Duke Xian suspect Prince Shensheng, and even felt that Prince Shensheng would threaten his life. So Duke Xian said, ‘Don’t Worry! I will solve the problem.’ (爾勿憂，吾將圖之。)⁵

³ Sima Qian 司馬遷, Annotation by Zhang shoujie 張守節, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), vol.39, p.1984.

⁴ Sima Qian 司馬遷, Annotation by Zhang shoujie 張守節, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), vol.39, p.1988.

⁵ Annotation by Wei Zhao 韋昭, *Guo Yu* 國語 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), vol.7–8, p.274-275.

Then Duke Xian arranged for Prince Shensheng to attack Gaoluoshi 皋落氏 in Dong Mountain 東山 in the winter of the second year of Duke Min of Lu (魯閔公二年, 660 BCE). He granted Prince Shensheng two things. The first one is pianyi 偏衣, one clothes with two different colours on both sides of the back seam. It is strange and totally different from the normal clothes in Central Plains (龍奇無常). The other one is jinjue 金玦, a penannular jade ring made of bronze. Bronze means mercilessness and jue 玦 means split (金寒玦離). So both means that Duke Xian would like to replace Prince Shensheng. Although nearly all ministers advised Shensheng to escape. Shensheng still hesitated, and finally he decided to attack. In the end, he won the battle. But after returning to his country, there were more slanderous words, saying that Prince Shensheng had more power, and he would rebel against Duke Xian soon.

Li Ji's third plan was 'to replace the beams with rotten timbers' (偷梁換柱). She first contacted Li Ke 里克 privately who is the right-hand minister in Jin State, so that he would not interfere with her plans. Then in the twenty-first year of Duke Xian of Jin (656 BCE), she lied to Prince Shensheng that she dreamed of his mother and asked him to hold a memorial ceremony for his mother. After the memorial ceremony, Prince Shensheng offered a sacrificial meat to Duke Xian who went out hunting at that time. Then Li Ji put poison in the sacrificial meat, to frame up Prince Shensheng. When Duke Xian came back and found the poisonous sacrificial meat, he was very furious. Then Prince Shensheng fled to Quwo City, where he later committed suicide. This is the whole story of Prince Shensheng.

3. Analysis of the Tragedy of Prince Shensheng

Before we start our analysis of Prince Shensheng. We should have a basic definition of 'tragedy'. 'Tragedy' is a traditional dramatic genre based on the suffering of hero and sorrowful

event, dealing with issues like life and death, fate and free, sacrifice and revenge. Aristotle was the first to define the distinction between tragedy and history. The history of tragedy can be traced from ancient Greek and Roman tragedy, and English Renaissance tragedy (such as Shakespearean play) to the present day.⁶ Tragedy plays a unique and vital role in Western civilization. Well, for Eastern civilization of ancient China, maybe there are no words like ‘Tragedy’ in Chinese Classics, but there exist many touching stories and sufferings of hero. The story of Prince Shensheng is also one of the tragedies in ancient Chian.

3.1 Analysis of the Tragedy of Figures

Why do we think the story of Prince Shensheng is a tragedy? From my point of view, Prince Shensheng was a very kind and virtuous person, who was cautious and prudent, noble and unsullied, old-aged and decorous, and could not bear to hurt others. So what does his sufferings make us feel pity and sad? I will elucidate that in three aspects.

Firstly, the figure's conflict and contradiction lies in that he was so prudent, that he still could not escape from disaster. He was cautious about what he did and what he said, but there were many slanderous talks of him. He did not have the mind to harm Duke Xian or Li Ji, but his father did not believe him. Even when he was framed by Li Ji and fled to Quwo City, he still did not choose to explain or escape to the last. Because he said, ‘My father is old, confused. If I explain the truth to him, Li Ji must be killed. Without Li Ji, my father would not be happy, even could not sleep well and have an appetite for food. If my father was unhappy, I would also feel sad for it. So I prefer to take my own life.’⁷

⁶ Bushnell, Rebecca W., *Tragedy a Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

⁷ *Gulian zhuan* 穀梁傳 said that ‘Li Ke 里克’ asked Shensheng, *Shi Ji* 史記 said that ‘someone’ asked Shensheng, while *Li Ji* 禮記 said that ‘Chong’er 重耳’ asked Shensheng. Edit and Annotation by Fan Ning 范寧, Commentary by Yang Shixun 楊世勛, Collated by Shisanjing zhushu zhengli weiyuanhui 十三經注疏整理委員會, *Chunqiu gulian zhuan zhushu* 春秋穀梁傳注疏 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), vol.8, p.148. Sima Qian 司馬遷, Annotation by Zhang shoujie 張守節, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), vol.39, p.1988. Annotation by Zheng xuan 鄭玄, Commentary by Kong Yingda 孔穎達, Collated by shisanjing zhushu zhengli weiyuanhui 十三經

Secondly, he was filial and obedient to his father, but he was suspected. His father asked him to govern Quwo city, and then he went. His father asked him to attack Gaoluoshi, though many ministers objected, he still obeyed Duke Xian's command—'Kill all enemies and come back'(盡敵而返) Did not he know his father's mind? He knew. Before the attack, Duke Xian just told Li Ke 里克 'I have many sons, I still have no idea who to crown.' (寡人有子，未知其太子誰立。) And Prince Shensheng also asked Li Ke, 'Will I be dethroned?' (吾其廢乎?) From Prince Shensheng's words, we can find that he knew Duke Xian's indifference and heartlessness to him, but he still did his duty as a son. Unfortunately, even with such respect and filiality, he still did not gain the trust of his father. In other words, his father did not know his son.

Thirdly, he was a virtuous person, and he had loyalty and responsibility to the people of his country. According to *Guo Yu*, Before his suicide, he asked others to tell Hu Tu 狐突, 'I was guilty of not listening to your advice until death. I do not dare to cherish my life, but my father is old, the country still has much distress, [and the people are suffering]. If you do not come out to join the government, how could the country become? If you can join the government and assist my father, even if I died I would feel no regret.' (申生有罪，不聽伯氏，以至於死。申生不敢愛其死，雖然，吾君老矣，國家多難，伯氏不出，奈吾君何？伯氏苟出而圖吾君，申生受賜以至於死，雖死何悔！)

Because Prince Shensheng was a good person, a filial son, and a virtuous Prince, the people in Jin State felt pity for his suffering and death, always remembering him in mind.

3.2 Analysis of the Tragedy of Plot

In the tragedy of the story of Prince Shensheng, there are three key time points which

influence Prince Shensheng's fate. In these three time points, Prince Shensheng gained many wise advice from ministers, and he had many choices to change.

The first turning point was when he was arranged to Quwo City and was kept away from Duke Xian. It is a very early time point. If he found it vigilantly, he could escape from disaster. As Shi Wei 士蒯 said, 'The Prince cannot be crowned...It is better to escape, not letting the framed things come. It is also good if he can follow the example of Taibo 太伯 (to give way to the good men in government administration), and he could gain the good reputation.' (太子不得立矣。分之都城，而位以卿，先為之極，又安得立！不如逃之，無使罪至。為吳太伯，不亦可乎，猶有令名)

As Shi Wei said, at a very early time, Prince Shensheng can prevent trouble before it happens. On one hand, he can escape to other States to stay away from disaster, and he can also protect his own life. On the other hand, if he had been aware of his father's mind, he could also learn from Tai Bo, and he could escape and give way to Xi Qi. Therefore, I think to some extent, he did not choose to escape, which means he did not have enough foresight. Also, he did not choose to give away the position, which means he did not have enough courage. He chose the worst one, just waiting for the disaster without prevention.

The second turning point was when he was granted pianyi 偏衣 and jinjue 金玦. Many ministers like Hu Tu 狐突, Liangyu Ziyang 梁餘子養, Han Yi 罕夷, Xian Danmu 先丹木, including servant Zan 僕人贊 all found the strange of the things granted, and advised Prince Shensheng to escape. As Liangyu Ziyang 梁餘子養 said, 'For a military leader, he should accept the command in Royal Ancestral Temple, and accept the sacrificial meat in She. He will be granted the normal military uniform. But Prince Shensheng did not get the normal one, but motley clothes. From that we can understand Duke Xian's mind. So Prince Shensheng would rather escape than die which is not real filiality (for historical records will record that his father

killed him.)’(帥師者，受命於廟，受賑於社，有常服矣。不獲而龍，命可知也，死而不孝，不如逃之。) Zhutian Guanghong 竹添光鴻 also annotated that, ‘The mind of Duke Xian of Jin is obvious, so the only way to Prince Shensheng is to die. However, it will bring a bad reputation to Duke Xian.’(君意可知，則有一死耳，然是貽父之惡名也。)⁸

Prince Shensheng understood the meaning behind pianyi and jinjue, and he had the choice to escape. It is also the best time point for him to escape, for he had the army, and he had an sufficient reason. And in that battle, Prince Shensheng was very difficult, for he was hesitant and puzzled. The ministers provided him with two good choices. The best one (shang, 上) was to escape with the army, avoiding disaster early. The medium one (Zhong, 中) was not to start the war and go back to Jin State, in which he also complied with Duke Xian’s command and did not kill people’s lives (孝而安民). But he did not choose both. He chose the worst one (xia, 下) and attacked Gaoluoshi. However, no matter wins or loses, he would suffer disaster. If he was defeated, he would suffer the risk of life threat. If he was defeated, he will gain more contribution and support from the people, which would deepen his father's suspicion (戰則危身，有功則速罪).

The third turning point was when he had been framed by Li Ji. This was the last key time point. Also, this time point was not as good as before, for he had missed the best time to prevent. Now it had been the remediation afterwards. But at this time, he still had the chance to save himself. Prince Shensheng had three choices. As mentioned before, the best one was to explain to Duke Xian, because he had evidences to prove the possibility of Li Ji’s conspiracy. But he gave up. The medium one was to escape to other states, he could also save his life (just like what Chong’er 重耳 would do years later). But he did not want to escape to other states with ill fame

⁸ Annotated by Zhutian Guanghong, *Zuoshi huijian* 左氏會箋 (Chengdu, bashu shushe, 2008), P.375.

of killing his father. Finally, he chose the last but worst choice, to suicide and end his life.

To conclude, we can find that Prince Shensheng had many chances to change and save himself, but he did not choose. There were so many turning points for him to different endings, but he still went to the worst one. This is the reason why we feel pity.

4. The Analysis of the Character of Prince Shensheng

We feel sympathy and sorrow for Prince Shensheng's tragedy, but we will also find that to some extent Shensheng's death was not accidental, but inevitable. Because it was caused by his character. One's character determines his fate. His character determines that he is destined to this end from the very beginning.

You Shi had predicted the fate of Prince Shensheng, 'An unsullied person must be stupid. Because the unsullied person can easily be humiliated, and the stupid person has no awareness to escape from disaster. Even if he wants to not change, how could he make it?' (甚精必愚。精為易辱，愚不知避難。雖欲無遷，其得之乎？)⁹ Han Xichou 韓席籌 also said, 'Probably the unsullied person cherishes his fame. So once he was humiliated, he would be angry, and then what leaves for him only the way of death. You Shi indeed predicts that.' (蓋精潔之人，顧惜名節，一遭污衄，墳不自勝，惟有一死而已，以辭自理，優施固早料其必不能也。)¹⁰

Prince Shensheng was an unsullied and cautious person, so he could not bear to be humiliated. For example, a sharpened knife can also easily break off. Prince Shensheng owned the same idea from the beginning to the end—to death. When he attacked Gaoluoshi, he was humiliated by pianyi and jinjue granted by Duke Xian, which means Duke Xian's distrust and ruthlessness.

⁹ Annotation by Wei Zhao 韋昭, Guo Yu 國語 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), vol.7, p.268.

¹⁰ Edit and Annotation by Han Xichou 韓席籌, *Zuozhuan fenguo jizhu* 左傳分國集註 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1963), vol.5, p.250–251.

This humiliation is obvious, and nearly all ministers know. Under such humiliation, the unsullied man, Prince Shensheng, absolutely could not bear and wanted to prove his innocence. So this is the reason why he chose the worst choice and he preferred to die in war, for he wanted to prove himself. Besides, when he was framed by the poisoned sacrificial meat, he was humiliated by Li Ji. Because he did not have the mind to kill his father, but he was framed to do it. So under this humiliation, he also preferred to end his life instead of facing the tarnished reputation.

Therefore, it is because of his character, that death is the only way to end his suffering. So he did not choose to escape from disaster with a soft and rational mind. However, can it really end his suffering? Was he really a filial son? Can Hu Tu really stop the chaos in the State and the confusion of his father? If he does nothing, how could he ask others to make vigorous efforts to turn the situation (力挽狂瀾)?

In fact, as Zhutian guanghong says, ‘Prince Shensheng heard what Yangshe said, which was in accord with his idea. Then he resolutely had the idea to die in battle. However, Hu Tu was only concerned for Prince’s life, hoping that he could escape unscathed. So he advised.’(太子聞羊舌之言，與其意合，於是斷然有死戰之志也。狐突中心唯愛太子，故欲其違難全身，所以諫也。).¹¹ After his death, His father was recorded as ‘Duke Xian of Jin killed his son, the Prince shensheng.’(晉侯殺其世子申生) in *The Spring and Autumn Annals*. According to *Guo Yu*, Prince Shensheng’s Posthumous title is ‘dutiful’(共君). As Kong Yingda 孔穎達 annotated, ‘If someone’s father is not wise, and his father does bad things. A real filial son should not make his father do the bad thing. However, Prince Shensheng cannot solve it well. Then he makes his father to kill him. Therefore, even though he has the mind of filiality, it is wrong in reason, so his posthumous title is not “filial” but “dutiful”. For he is only obedient to what his father’s

¹¹ Annotated by Zhutian Guanghong, *Zuoshi huijian* 左氏會箋 (Chengdu, bashu shushe, 2008), P.376.

command.’(父不義也，孝子不陷親於不義，而申生不能自理，遂陷父有殺子之惡。雖心存孝，而於理終非，故不曰孝，但謚為恭，以其順於父事而已。)¹² Prince Shensheng did not want his father to be unhappy, but in the end, he still did not achieve his wishes even at the expense of his life.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the story of Prince Shensheng in the Spring and Autumn Era is also a tragedy in ancient China. It is not only because of the contradiction in the figure, Prince Shensheng, but also the ups and downs of the plots. For example, he was a conscious person but still could not escape from the disaster. He was filial to his father and did not have the mind to harm his father and Li Ji, but he still was suspicious. He was a virtuous person and had a sense of duty to the people, but he still did not have a good ending.

Prince Shensheng had at least three turning points in the whole event. He could escape at the very beginning, and he could explain after being framed. Although he had many choices, he always chose the worst one. At the very beginning, he could prevent and stay away from disaster, even gain a good reputation like Tai Bo. But it needs a profound foresight. After events happened, he could escape to other States to save his life, which at least could keep a second chance for him. But it needs enough courage, especially at the key point.

We will find that though Prince Shensheng had many choices, his character determines his fate. If he can change his mind and character, sincerely accepting the wise advice, which is the start of change for his fate. I also think it is not wise to clearly know that it is a way to die but

¹² Annotation by Zheng xuan 鄭玄, Commentary by Kong Yingda 孔穎達, Collated by shisanjing zhushu zhengli weiyuanhui 十三經注疏整理委員會, *Liji Zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshu, 2000), vol.6, p.212.

still choose to die. But overall, Prince Shensheng is a good person, a filial son, and a virtuous Prince, and we feel pity for his suffering and his death.

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摘要

本文聚焦於太子申生的悲劇故事，並對其進行人物評價。首先本文根據《左傳》、《國語》、《史記》、《穀梁傳》等記載，對太子申生事件有較全面的概述。其次分別從「人物的悲劇性」與「情節的衝突性」着手進行探討。太子申生之悲劇在於，他是一個有賢德、善良之人，但是他雖小心謹慎，卻仍無法避禍；對父親一片孝心，仍被懷疑乃至誣陷；臨死顧念家國，卻最終沒能善終，亦未改變晉國之亂。整個事件中，他有三個關鍵的轉折點。其一為被派去曲沃城，其二為伐東山臯落氏，其三為被陷害毒殺晉獻公。在這三個轉折點中，都有賢臣的諫言，他也有選擇的機會，如上策之奔亡他國、讓位奚齊，中策之不攻而返、孝而安民，但他最後都選擇了下策，即固守與順從，最終結束了自己的生命。此外，本文也分析太子申生的性格，發現他的結局抑或其性格所致。他為人小心精潔，又不忍人。因為顧惜名節，則不堪侮辱，惟有一死，從而不能以柔弱、迂曲的方式避禍。而他本意恭順其父，最後卻反陷親不義，亦或其性格之不足。誠然明知送死，而去送死，實非聖賢君子之行。因此太子申生的悲劇，也確令人感到扼腕嘆息。