

THE ARTS OF THE *FANG-SHI*

The term *fang-shi* was applied to a wide variety of men who practiced mantic arts. The word “*fang*” means “method” or “prescription”; *shi* is a word we have encountered before, meaning “gentleman.” Thus the name *fang-shi* denotes a man with some special method or secret formula. As the narrative accounts concerning the First Emperor and Wu-di have made clear, these men attained great influence during the first century of the imperial era. Although their influence waned by the later Han, they continued to be a significant force in the intellectual and religious traditions of China, and remain so to this day.

Origins of the fang-shi traditions

The *Shi-ji* traces the rise of the *fang-shi* to the naturalist philosopher Zou Yan (whom we met in the reading on Warring States Naturalism), but it is likely that his function was more to give legitimacy to their styles of practice than to invent them. *Fang-shi* made heavy use of the yin-yang five-forces cosmology that became popular during the Qin-Han era, and Zou was one of the first to formulate consistent theories to make that cosmology competitive with the sophisticated ideologies of the persuader tradition.

Geographically, the *fang-shi* movement seems to have originated on the Shandong peninsula, moving north along the coast of Bo-hai Bay through the influence of Zou Yan, who carried these ideas from Qi to Yan during the third century B.C. It appears to me that the most frequent native origin of individual *fang-shi* is the region of Lang-ye, on the southern coast of the Shandong peninsula. The First Emperor was greatly attracted to this obscure spot, and returned to it several times. It was the point from which he dispatched envoys to the isles of the immortals, and it was also the main destination of his final journey.

There is no record of Lang-ye as a major population center to explain why so many *fang-shi* originated there. But Lang-ye had a puzzling history. During the fifth century B.C., the southern state of Yue, which was located down the coast about 400 miles, established a beachhead in Lang-ye. What is more, they relocated the capital of Yue from south of the Yangzi to Lang-ye, where it remained for about a century. The rationale and logistics of locating the capital of Yue far north in an area generally regarded as a part of Qi are a mystery.

The fact that Lang-ye was in some way a meeting ground between the two very different traditions of Qi and Yue may have bearing on the rise of the *fang-shi* traditions. As we saw when we investigated the Chinese Neolithic, Shandong was the home of the Long-shan Culture while the region of Yue was the base of the Liang-zhu Culture. It may be that Lang-ye represented a gateway for the holdover traditions of the very ancient southeast coastal tribes into mainstream Chou culture.

Varieties of fang-shi arts

Most of our accounts of *fang-shi* arts are derived from texts post-dating the Former Han. It is only with the *History of the Latter Han*, a text actually written about A.D. 450, that we find systematic records of the practices of *fang-shi*, though the names of some *fang-shi* manuals are recorded in the *History of the Former Han*.

What sorts of arts did *fang-shi* practice? As the accounts of the First Emperor and Wu-di indicate, they were deeply involved in the cult of immortalism. They developed herbal and mineral formulas to lengthen life (some of these proved lethal) and practiced semi-shamanistic communication with “immortals,” conceived as people who had achieved the state of spirits without dying, which gave them special supernatural abilities without loss of corporeal form. In some cases, arts of yoga and dietary or sexual regimens were also part of the *fang-shi* repertoire.

Fang-shi were also masters of a wide variety of mantic (soothsaying) arts. Some of these were relatively straightforward, such as divination by means of the sexagenary stem-branch cycle or by the *Yi jing*. Others were more esoteric, such as divination by dreams, by the stars, by landforms, or by facial characteristics. Still others were simply bizarre: divination by bird calls, wind angles, and bamboo cracks.

Fang-shi and Han ideologies

The *fang-shi* cults did not constitute a single ideology. Drawing heavily on five-forces cosmology, *fang-shi* were professional practitioners who might find legitimizing theory from a number of sources: Daoism, Huang-Lao thought, even Confucianism. Those who shaped these broader doctrines also borrowed liberally from the *fang-shi* traditions. This often makes it difficult to sort individuals into one or another distinct ideological pigeonhole.

For example, a number of the Confucian classicists whom we will encounter below were engaged in styles of interpretation and soothsaying that closely resemble the *fang-shi*. It was, in fact, recognized during the Han that there was significant overlap between these two groups. *Fang-shi*, however, rarely employed an ethical framework in their practice. Their tools were intended to produce goods for the individual rather than for society, and the goods produced were most likely to be longevity, wealth, or power.

Stories of fang-shi

Fang-shi appear throughout the narratives of the reigns of the First Emperor and Wu-di. However, the focus is not on these men and their arts, but rather on the ease with which they hoodwinked these supposedly great emperors. Since the sources for the Former Han do not deem *fang-shi* worthy of biographical notices, we must go to the *History of the Latter Han* to find full accounts of the backgrounds and lives of these men. Three of these brief biographical notices are translated below. Bearing in mind that they stray beyond the period of this course

by over two centuries, we can nevertheless look to them for some insight into the way that *fang-shi* were perceived in Han times, when the occasional unmasking of a charlatan seems to have been no barrier to continued belief in esoteric spirit powers and their accessibility. (The texts are based on translations by Kenneth DeWoskin.)

The Biography of Yang You

Yang You was a native of Cheng-du in Shu. As a youth he studied the *Yi jing* and augmented that with knowledge of celestial rulers, primal pneuma, wind and clouds, and meteorognostics.* He served as a commandary scholar.

A flock of wild magpies used to assemble night after night above the armory tower. The grand protector Lian Fan asked Yang You about this. Yang explained, "This portends a minor military action, but it will not result in any harm." Slightly more than twenty days later, the Man-yi tribes of Guang-rou County rebelled, killing the magistrate and his officers. The commandary sent out a force to punish them.

Later there arose a wind strong enough to blow sticks around. The grand protector asked Yang about it. "Someone will soon present a gift of fruit," Yang explained. "The color of the fruit will be orange." It was not long before an officer-at-large presented Lian Fan with several bundles of tangerines.

Once, Yang was drinking with some companions. He cautioned the driver of his chariot, "After the third round of drinking we ought to prepare the chariot to depart." As soon as that moment arrived, he rushed away. Later that night, at his host's quarters, a fight broke out and a murder occurred. Yang You was asked how he had anticipated this. "Pigeons were squabbling in the tree that faces the local alter to the earth god," he explained. "This is the symbol of an armed crime."

Yang You's predictions were generally correct. He wrote a book of more than ten chapters called *The Perfect Balance*, and died at home.

*These arts involved the reading of the stars by means of certain specialized astral instruments and the interpretation of atmospheric phenomena, such as halos, and various weather phenomena. Prediction of different types of weather phenomena could constitute individual branches of specialization. The content of Yang's biographical notice indicates he was a master of ornithognostics--fortune-telling by bird behavior.

The Biography of Zhao Yan

Zhao Yan was a native of Lang-ye. As a youth he studied the esoteric arts. In the year 160, a bandit from Lang-ye named Lao Bing and a bandit from Mt. Tai named Shu-sun Wu-ji joined forces and murdered the chief commandant, overran the precincts under Lang-ye's jurisdiction, and massacred all the government workers. The imperial court appointed Zong Zi of Nan-yang as the special colonel for suppressing the bandits. With staff and battle ax in hand, Zong Zi led his troops, supervising the soldiers of several commandaries in a collective assault on Shu-sun Wu-ji.

Zhao Yan developed a plan of action that was based on an extension of the art of Orphans and Voids.** The bandits were headquartered in Ju. In the vicinity of Ju were five places with “*yang*” in their names, and Zhao said that troops had been called up from all of these places. In this way, they would prevail by enlisting the “orphans” to attack the “voids.” Zong Zi presented Zhao Yan's plan to the emperor and an edict was sent down dispatching troops from the five *yang* locations to the region.

Zhao Yan then employed the system of Evading Stems in order to instruct Zong Zi on the exact hour at which to advance his troops.* In a single battle, the bandits were entirely wiped out and their fortified headquarters burned to the ground. In no time at all, the provinces of Xu and Yan were pacified.

The Biography of Xu Deng

Xu Deng was a native of Min-zhong. Originally he was a woman, but he transformed himself into a man. His skills were in the arts of the spirit-medium.** Another person named Zhao Bing was a native of Dong-yang and he was able to work the spells of the Yue region.***

**This art, unrelated to recent welfare reform ideas, employs the sexagenary stems and branches, correlating them to time periods. It focuses on whichever two of the twelve branches are, after manipulations, left unmatched by one of the ten stems (“orphaned”), and certain complementary branches, called “voids.”

*Another sexagenary technique, associated with Huang-Lao thought.

**Mediums were frequently women. This may be why Hsu decided he'd been one.

***According to a commentator, the spells of Yue were formulas for exorcisms.

Once, during a period of widespread warfare and pestilence, the two men met on the banks of the Wu-shang River and swore a bond with each other, vowing to use their arts to cure illness. They said to one another, "Now that we have joined our wills, we must test one another's abilities."

Xu Deng cast his spells on the waters of the river and the river ceased to flow. Zhao Bing cast his spells on a dead tree and the tree immediately sent forth new buds. The two looked at each other and laughed, then set off together, walking a single Way.

Xu Deng was the elder, so Zhao Bing treated him as the master. They venerated purity and frugality. When they performed the rites to the spirits they used only east-flowing water for their libations and bark peeled from a mulberry tree as the meat. Though their treatments employed nothing more than chants and spells, they always effectively overcame illness.

Later, after Xu Deng died, Zhao Bing traveled to east to Chang-an where the people did not recognize him. Zhao climbed on top of a house with a thatched roof, set up a cauldron, lit a fire, and began cooking a meal on the roof. The owner of the house watched him with shock and panic, but Zhao merely smiled and paid him no heed. His food cooked through, but the roof was not damaged in the slightest.

On another occasion, Zhao was seeking passage across a river but the ferryman would not take him. Bing set out a cloth and sat in the middle of it. Then with a long whistle, he stirred up the winds and whipped up wild currents which carried him across.

After that, the common people worshipped him like a spirit and his following grew and grew. The magistrate of Chang-an resented the way in which he enchanted the people and had him arrested and executed. The people built a shrine for him in Yong-kang, which to this day is not violated, even by gnats.