

## Lord Shāng 商君

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**Abstract.** Gūngsūn Yāng 公孫鞅, so called since he came of the ruling clan of his native Wèi, referred to as Wèi Yāng 衛鞅 in other states (chiefly Ngwèi 魏, where he had unsuccessfully sought a career), and later as Shāng-jywn 商君, Lord Shāng, after his fief in Chín,<sup>1</sup> is famous in our time as the political philosopher of the Shāng-jywn Shū 商君書 (SJS). Early notices of him imply an originally military persona; later ones increasingly civilianize this picture. The early notices are correct.

**The Bamboo Annals** 竹書紀年 (Ngwèi 魏, last entry dated 0299, and our only 04c source) includes the following relatively assured entries:<sup>2</sup>

- 0343 We fought with Tyén Pàn of Chí at Mǎ-líng.  
 0342 5th month: Tyén Pàn of Chí and the men of Sùng attacked our eastern border and surrounded Píng-yáng. 9th month: Wèi Yāng of Chín attacked our western border. 10th month: Hándān attacked our northern border. The King attacked Wèi Yāng; our host was defeated.  
 0341 We walled Jì-yáng. Chín enfeoffed Wèi Yāng in Wū 烏 and changed its name to Shāng 商.  
 0339 Sū Hú of Chín led a host and attacked Jvng. Syāng of Hán defeated Sū Hú of Chín at Swàn-shwěi.  
 0335 King Hwèi-chvng<sup>3</sup> of Ngwèi's 36th year; changed it to the 1st year. The King met with the Lords 諸侯 at Sywǰōu. With Wú-jyàng, Master of Ywè, he attacked Chǔ.  
 0331 Lúng Jyǎ [of Ngwèi 魏] and the Chín host fought in Dyāu-yīn; our host was defeated and fled.  
 0320 Chín took our Chyw-wò 曲沃 and Píng-jōu.  
 0319 [King] Hwèi-chvng of Ngwèi died.

This is all of Yāng that the Ngwèi courtiers of Syāng-wáng's time were concerned to put on record. Yáng serves as a Chín general in 0342, is rewarded in 0341, and then vanishes; later battles with Chín mention different Chín generals. Of the three attacks in 0342, the Ngwèi King himself meets the one led by Yāng. This allocation of resources, and Chín's victory on that occasion, suggest that Yāng was at minimum a competent commander, but he evidently did not continue as a military leader in Chín.

<sup>1</sup>To avoid complexity, I will simply call him Yāng in most of what follows.

<sup>2</sup>I avoid the vexed problem of the "modern" and "reconstructed" versions of the BA by limiting myself to those entries present in both; these include all three mentions of Yāng.

<sup>3</sup>Use of the King's posthumous designation in BA proves that BA is not a contemporary chronicle; it was compiled retrospectively in the reign of the next Ngwèi King, Syāng-wáng. It was not an official document, since it was buried with Syāng-wáng when he died.

The Chín ruler whom Yāng served in 0342 was Syàu-gūng (r 0361-0338). Later mentions of Yāng will differ as to how long his service under Syàu-gūng lasted.

**Sywndž 15.** In this 0250 military debate before the King of Jàu, Yāng is mentioned as a famous general, but of the lower sort: “So Tyén Dān of Chí, Jwāng Chyāu of Chǔ, Wèi Yāng of Chín, and Myòu Jī of Yēn are all commonly said to have been good at using troops, but in fact, their skill and strength were insufficient to serve their rulers.” Though it is concerned to dispute Wèi Yāng’s military reputation, this passage leaves no doubt that, as of the mid 03c, Wèi Yāng *had* a military reputation.

**Lǚ-shì Chūn/Chyōu** (LSCC). The core 12-chapter LSCC, the only part of the work to which the postface date of 0241 may validly be applied,<sup>4</sup> was completed only nine years after the above Sywndž comment. It presumably represents a Chín rather than a Chǔ impression of Yāng, whom it mentions in two passages:

- LSCC 11/5:6. The dying minister of Ngwèi recommends Wèi Yāng as his replacement, but says that the King should kill him if he does not employ him. The King does neither. Wèi Yāng goes to Chín, where his advice is heeded. [From a group of tales about advice which later proved to be correct].
- LSCC 12/5:4. Tyén Wǎn’s envoy Gūngsūn Húng praises Tyén Wǎn to the dismissive ruler of Chín as one with many retainers who could be teachers even to Gwǎn Jùng or Shāng Yāng. [From a group of tales of pride and honor].

In the first of these stories, Yāng is treated exclusively as a statesman. The second ranks him with Gwǎn Jùng of Chí, the supposed civil architect, though not the military executant, of Chí’s onetime greatness. Yāng has been civilianized, and exciting tales (his escape from death in LSCC 11) are beginning to accumulate around him.

The later layers of the LSCC are from the Chín Dynasty proper.<sup>5</sup> The first of two mentions of Yāng adds nothing to the above; the second explains the connection between his civil and military careers:

- LSCC 19/4:5. [Wèi Yāng is bracketed with the statesman Gwǎn Jùng].
- LSCC 22/2:2. Wèi Yāng “did not go to Chín because he had relatives or friends there, but because it could employ him. He wanted responsibilities, but the only ones available were military, so he became a Chín general and attacked Ngwèi . . .” Tells the tale of his betraying and capturing the Prince of Ngwèi, which later prevented Wèi Yāng’s being received in Ngwèi when he tried to flee the new ruler of Chín [who was hostile to him, and later executed him].

The betrayal story contradicts the BA entries, since it puts a different leader in charge of the Ngwèi troops in 0342; it adds the note of betrayal to Wèi Yāng’s evolving myth. At the same time, it confirms what was only an *ex silentio* impression from the BA, that Yāng’s first service in Chín was military rather than civil.

In the Hàn materials to be considered next, the civilianization of Yāng goes farther, and his chief role in Chín is that of a statesman, the creator of the Chín system.

<sup>4</sup>The postface directly follows the 12 Jì 紀, and precedes the rest of the work.

<sup>5</sup>As may be seen in the increasingly severe enforcement of the taboo on the name of the First Emperor’s father, Chǔ 楚 (the usual replacement was Jīng 荆) in the Lǎn (LSCC 13-20) and Lùn (LSCC 21-26) sections of the work, and in the opinions expressed in those sections.

**Jān-gwó Tsṽ (JGT).** Much early material was edited into our JGT by Lyóu Syàng toward the end of Hàn. Some material of this type, not all of it known to Lyóu Syàng, was found at Mǎwángdwēi (c0168). The first two LSCC stories above were included in Lyóu Syàng's JGT. There are two additional Yāng stories, the first of which may be summarized in this outline of Yāng's career :

- JGT 46 (Crump 54f):
  - Wèi Yāng goes from Ngwèi to Chín
  - 0345. Syàu-gūng employs him as a minister
  - Syàu-gūng gives him the fief of Shāng
  - Shāng-jyṽn's new laws are universally accepted
  - The next year, public morals are impeccable; Chín's army is feared
  - 0338. Syàu-gūng falls ill; wants Yāng to succeed him; Yāng declines
  - 0337. Hwèi-wáng 1st year; Shāng-jyṽn takes leave
  - Hwèi-wáng heeds slander; has Yāng dismembered when he returns

This makes Wèi Yāng's career in Chín begin earlier than does the BA, and gives that career an exclusively civilian character; the strength of Chín's armies is said to be due to Yāng's internal policies, not his external leadership. This would be in keeping with the predominant interest of the JGT literature in civil adroitness over military valor. It gives Yāng a slightly longer career in Chín than does the BA.

The other new mention of Wèi Yāng is a story in the Sū Chín 蘇秦 cycle. Sū Chín in JGT is an entirely imaginary figure: the ultimate diplomatic persuader.

- JGT 158 (Crump 202f). A long persuasion by Sū Chín tells how Wèi Yāng tricked the ruler of Ngwèi into attacking the eastern states Chí and Yēn, thus leaving its western territories open to Chín annexation without any great effort on Chín's part – a diplomatic rather than a military victory over Ngwèi.

This converts Wèi Yāng into a persuader like Sū Chín himself.

**Shǐ Jì (SJ) 69.** Its historical value is spoiled by the textual ineptness of its author, Szmǎ Tán. Apart from a typical Tán topos, where a colleague urges Yāng to resign while he can, SJ 69 expands the JGT stories into this chronology of Yāng's career:

- [c0363]. Yāng, having left Ngwèi, has an interview with Chín Syàu-gūng
  - Yāng wishes to change the laws; debate follows; Yāng's policy is approved
  - The new laws organize the populace into mutual-responsibility groups
  - After a year, many complain; Yāng punishes the Heir Apparent's tutor
  - After ten years, all approve the new laws
- 0352. Yāng is ordered to besiege the capital of Ngwèi, Añ-yì [unknown to BA]
- 0350. Yāng reforms land and administrative divisions of Chín
- 0343. Chín is successful and honored among the Warring States
- 0341. Chí defeats Ngwèi at Mǎ-líng [actual date: 0343]
- 0340. Yāng proposes plan to gain territory from Ngwèi
  - Yāng traps the Ngwèi Heir Apparent; Ngwèi cedes the desired territory
  - Yāng is made prime minister, with the title and fief of Lord Shāng
  - Colleague vainly tries to persuade Yāng to resign his ministership
- 0338. Syàu-gūng dies, Yāng attempts to flee, but is executed with his family

This gives Yāng a 26-year career in Chín, and makes him the originator of many features known to us (and to Tán) from the later Chín laws. The BA gave Yāng only a 6-year Chín career, from his military victory in 0342 to Syàu-gūng's death in 0338

What was Yāng's initial role in Chín? JGT 46, as further expanded in SJ 69, specifies a long civil career, after the second phase of which (and a victory of deceit and not of arms over Ngwèi) he received the fief of Shāng. This is contradicted by the nearly contemporary BA, which locates the gift of Shāng in the year after Yāng's military victory over Ngwèi's own army. The long civilian career detailed in the later texts (and the transformation of his military victories into matters of ruse and betrayal) must then be attributed to the constant civilianizing trend which is equally exhibited by all the early elite literature, going back to the Dzwǒ Jwàn and before.<sup>6</sup>

**Conclusion.** Yāng's military career was remembered in Ngwèi (BA, 0299) and Jàu (the 0250 debate). It was also recalled in Chín, as the late LSCC (c0209) attests. But from the mid 03c, Yāng was known as the statesman who strengthened Chín not by leading its armies, but by shaping its society. That view is strengthened by the SJS, which is devoted to statecraft rather than warcraft.<sup>7</sup> Reports of Yāng's statecraft agree on certain features; among them, that the Chín laws were applied ruthlessly, without regard for persons. To this is attributed the enmity of the Chín elite, and the execution of Yāng as soon as his patron, Syàu-gūng, had died.

Is such a civil policy intelligible for a statesman well grounded in military affairs? I would say, extremely so. It amounts to extending military discipline to civil society, and to concentrating the activities of that society on the logistics of war, to the neglect, or more precisely the prohibition, of all other activities.<sup>8</sup>

**Career.** It is then likely that Wèi Yāng, from the minor state of Wèi, of good family and thus with military training, found no position in Ngwèi but was better received in Chín, being (like Lǚ Bù-wéi later) first tested in a military role in 0342 and then put in charge of civil policy, to which he applied military discipline: top-down control, death for all crimes, no status exemptions. He was thus the founder of the draconic Chín system, but died soon after, in 0338. The elaboration of this civil legacy, in SJS and in anecdotes in other texts, has almost obscured Wèi Yāng's military side.

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<sup>6</sup>See Brooks **Lore**.

<sup>7</sup>More precisely, the chapters I identify as the core of that work (SJS 10-12) deal with military matters, so that the career here implied is in a sense followed in its entirety in SJS.

<sup>8</sup>The military side of Wèi Yāng was still remembered in Hàn, and a book of military tactics was written under his name. The Hàn Palace Library catalog lists it at HS 30 #423, after the classic "Wú Sūndǔ" and "Chí Sūndǔ," as 公孫鞅二十七篇. The same creative impulse led to the extension of the Sūndǔ and Wúdǔ, and the creation of the Sūn Bìn (Brooks **Sūn Wǔ**).