

## Ma Yong, Scholar and Poet

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In the distant epoch of the Eastern Han Dynasty arises the figure of Ma Yong (79-166 AD), the Confucian scholar who wrote the famous poem

"Weiqi Fu": "Weiqi Rhapsody".

The poem is included in the famous poetry anthology "Shi Jing", in the section "Minor odes". In fact, the roots of the canonical variant of "Shi Jin" lie in the "List of Mao" and the commentaries to it provided by none other than Ma Yong himself and published under the title "Verse in the list of the scholar Mao with commentary by Ma Yong" ("Ma Yong Shi Ju").

The English translation is by John Fairbairn, the Bulgarian one -- by Konstantin Bayraktarov.

"Weiqi Fu" by Ma Yong

*"First the four corners are occupied  
To protect them and influence the sides,  
Then along the sides the lines are blocked  
So that the scattered stones gaze at one another from afar.  
Then come knight's moves large and small,  
Now far apart, now one on one,  
As groups jump out in leaps and bounds  
And make their way into the center.  
Having escaped they stop and prepare to move:  
To fly to left or right?  
Where the way is narrow and the enemy more numerous  
They will be unable to go far.  
But if themselves more numerous yet lacking plans,  
They will bunch aimlessly like a flock of sheep*

*And will forever be on the defensive  
As the opponent snaps at them on all sides.  
Instead attack where the enemy is overstretched,  
seek out his defects  
And send thunderbolts crashing in to his vital points.  
If there is profit, you will then have time to take it;  
If there is opportunity, you can make yourself strong.  
But if you are too greedy to capture his stones,  
He will break down your walls  
And when the dike bursts it will not be stopped  
But will overflow and the flood reach far and wide.”*

For us, it is interesting to look at the poem from the perspective of weiqi theory. The poem speaks for itself. From it, the high art of the game in these distant times is evident. It is even more interesting that metaphors are drawn in to describe weiqi theory. It can be seen how some later proverbs have ensued, who have almost become axioms. For example: "First attend to corners, then sides, then center."; "Use knight's moves to attack."; "Don't get carried away capturing the opponent's stones." Thus it can be seen how weiqi theory, metaphors, and poetry are organically connected.

There is too little evidence to assert that it was actually Ma Yong who created these metaphors, but one thing is clear: weiqi theory at the time was at a very high level, something unseen for other games in other geographic locations. Both translators of the poem share this opinion.

From here our interest shifts to Ma Yong. Indeed, what is known about him? Not much on first sight: researchers usually spare him no more than a few lines. Searching for further information is hampered by the fact that his name is spelled in different ways: Ma Yong, Ma Hun, Ma Rong, all referring to the same person.

The scholar lived in a turbulent epoch, a time of great crisis in the Han Empire. The time is in part interesting for the major political confrontation of the eunuchs and Confucians in the emperor's court. There is no evidence that Ma Yong took part in these difficult and dangerous political fights where "the one who makes a wrong move" often pays with his life, but it is possible that he had students in the emperor's court since many of the emperors are known for their penchant for weiqi.

Ma Yong founded a Confucian academy. In the book of the famous historian Fan E from the Tang epoch, it is shown that about twenty scientists founded their own schools in the middle of the second century. These private academies were in a certain ideological opposition to the Emperor's Academy. The latter was engaged in the so called "new texts" or the construction of Han myths which had an important role in the government of the Empire.

The academies akin to Ma Yong's were involved with the "old texts" or the things which later pass as "apocryphal materials". Ma Yong's academy however is sufficiently authoritative and influential. Thus Ma Yong had 400 ordinary and 50 especially advanced students which had the right to enter the "main hall" for a meeting with him. It is interesting that his student, the remarkable scholar Чжен Сюан, never met him during his three years of stay at the academy.

Actually, what was studied in these academies? Without doubt, the Five Classics, the five principal Confucian books. Ma Yong's example also shows that the formation of the "Four Arts" (calligraphy, music, poetry, weiqi) is under way. This is confirmed by the fact that Ma Yong has further written the poems "Ode on Flute" and "Ode on цин". But the deeds and life of Ma Yong show that among the educated and erudite people, weiqi had a deserved prestige.

Ma Yong was a researcher of the "old texts". As it is well known today, "new is well-forgotten old". This shows that he is an uncompromising explorer of the truth and is not interested in the fashions of time.

Ma Yong also left a trace in research on I Ching, the Book of Changes, even though not as bright one as his student Чжен Сюан. But they both carry out the thread of the "old texts" there and it is possible that Чжен Сюан inherited the problematic of Ma Yong.

Ma Yong is the first Confucian scholar to make a commentary on the Taoist treatise of Lao Tse "Tao Te Ching". And with this he paves the way of the exceptional Wang Bi (226-249) to investigate "Tao Te Ching" from the same perspective. Wang Bi also continues his explorations of the "old and apocryphal texts" and the natural conclusion is the formation of "сюан сюе" or "the secret and inmost science". From here "сюан сюе" treats religions without prejudices and prepares their convergence. In this way, Confucianism and Taoism, together with Buddhism, form the foundation of the "three religions"

characteristic of the Chinese. This harmony between religions makes the rise of Tang Dynasty China (618-907) possible, which becomes the world's leading cultural state.

Wang Bi, alas, dies at the young age of 23 but without doubt abides by the words of Confucius: "If you understand the truth in the morning, you can die in the evening." Wang Bi lives and creates in the Three Kingdoms Period in the House of Wei, among three generations of remarkable strategists and weiqi players: the famous general Cao Cao, his grandfather, and his son and future emperor Cao Pi.

So, what is Ma Yong's message to future generations? One of the possible answers is: harmony and tolerance, founded on broad erudition.

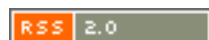
What is Ma Yong's message to future weiqi players? Ma Yong is a connecting figure of things seeming distant only on first sight. Without doubt the scholar shows through his life that these things can be connected. Erudition gives a very broad frame for the development and course of life of the weiqi player. Confucianism gives the ethicality in competitive practice. Looking at the past and the "old texts" gives a fresh view over modern times. Poetry gives us freedom of expression and flight of the imagination. Taoism gives depth in searching and treating of paradoxes, and weiqi is a paradox from beginning to end. I Ching seeks the hidden connection between phenomena and the way they transform. Teaching gives a new impulse to the understanding of weiqi theory. Aren't all these things important for gaining perfection?

*Translated into English by St. Traykov*

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