

= Luan Da =

Luan Da (simplified Chinese : 酗 ; traditional Chinese : 酗 ; pinyin : Luán Dà ; Wade ? Giles : Luan Ta , died 112 BC ;) was a religious figure during the early Han Dynasty from the state of Yue . He professed to know the secret to immortality and be able to communicate with spiritual beings . Possessing the gift of gab and adept at confidence tricks , Luan Da gained the favour of Emperor Wu of Han , also known as Han Wudi . In the space of a few months , he rose from a commoner to great influence , holding titles and land , and marrying one of the emperor 's daughters . However , he could not fulfill his promise to Emperor Wu , failing to produce a means to immortality . He gradually lost the emperor 's favour and went on a purported visit to immortals ; however , he was eventually captured and executed . At the apex of his career , many of his fellow mystics held him up as their role model and sought to emulate him . His death was a sign of the trade 's fall from favour ; laws were passed to restrict the practice of mediumship , even penalising those who married its practitioners .

= = Background = =

= = = Cultural background = = =

In early imperial China (the Qin and Han Dynasties) , religion centered around the realms of shen (spirits) and yin (shadow) . These realms were considered sacred , and religious figures attempted to contact their inhabitants through elaborate ceremonies in which the perceptions of the practitioner and audience were blurred through the use of smoke , incense , and music . Other practices were also employed to further manipulate the practitioner 's senses . For example , a chief priest would fast and meditate before he performed a sacrifice . The deprivation of food was thought to make him more susceptible to perceive shen , yin , and other phenomena within the smoke during the ritual . During the Han Dynasty , alleged mediums would fall into trances or perform ritual dances to accomplish supernatural feats . Some of these events were documented in the Shi jing (Canon of Odes) , written in the Zhou Dynasty .

= = = Han Wudi = = =

Emperor Han Wudi was a superstitious man , and believed that he could attain good health and immortality through spiritual means . One such method involved collecting morning dew on a platter and mixing crushed jade with it to form a " spiritual dew " . The emperor routinely drank this " spiritual dew " and only stopped after he fell severely ill from it .

The emperor employed several men who claimed to be able to produce elixirs of immortality or who could communicate with spiritual beings . Shaoweng , the court mystic who preceded Luan Da and had studied under the same teacher , performed a ritual that was exposed to be a fraud . Embarrassed that he had been tricked , the emperor ordered Shaoweng 's execution and kept quiet about the affair . Shaoweng purportedly died from consuming horse liver , which was thought to be poisonous at the time . Later , Emperor Wu reconsidered Shaoweng 's fraud , wondering if perhaps some of his mystical arts had been genuine . The emperor realized that his chance for immortality might have passed with Shaoweng 's execution , and began to search for a new mystic .

= = Career = =

= = = Early life = = =

Not much is known about Luan Da 's early life , only that he was born in Yue and was the eldest child in his family . Records do not even reveal his full name ; the Da (酗 ; big) simply signified his

seniority over his siblings . It was conventional at the time to omit surnames for minor figures in the annals of Chinese history , and thus this is not unusual .

= = = Rise to power = = =

The state of Yue was renowned for its mediums , and Luan Da was a fine example . The Shih ji (Records of the Grand Historian) described him as " tall and a brilliant speaker " , who was " fertile in techniques " and a master of esoteric arts , such as shadow play . He was originally a mystic in the court of the emperor 's brother , Liu Ji , the Prince of Jiao Dong . Liu Ji 's wife had mentioned Luan Da to her brother , the Marquess of Lecheng , Dingyi . Trying to boost his standing with Emperor Wu , Dingyi told the emperor of Shaoweng 's far more capable fellow disciple , Luan Da , in 113 BC .

Upon their meeting , Emperor Wu inquired into Luan Da and his teacher 's powers . In response , Luan Da boasted that he had met immortals . He also claimed that with enough stature and skill , one could create gold , manufacture a means to achieve immortality , dam the Yellow River , and become an immortal . Luan Da then expressed concern at how Shaoweng had been killed , but the excited emperor assured him that the rumours of Shaoweng 's execution were false . The emperor , in his enthusiasm , offered Luan Da anything if he would take Shaoweng 's place and discover the secret of immortality from his allegedly immortal master . To this , Luan Da replied :

" Your servant 's masters seek nothing of men , it is men who seek of them . If Your Majesty is determined to invite them here , then ennoble your envoys , make them imperial relatives , treat them with courtesy due guests , and do not humble them . Let your envoys each hang their seals of office from their girdles , and then you can send them to converse with spiritual beings . Whether the spiritual beings will accede or not is still uncertain , but if you bestow high honors on your envoys , then they may be induced to come . "

Remembering his experience with Shaoweng , the emperor turned cautious and tested Luan Da ; he requested the mystic to display his power . Luan Da set down a chess board and , while chanting , caused the chess pieces to charge at one another . The emperor was reassured that Luan Da truly had power . The trick was achieved by coating the pieces in a mixture of rooster 's blood , iron shavings , and " magnetic dust " . In Science and Civilisation in China (1986) , Joseph Needham discusses the details of this feat and proposed that lodestone was likely used : powdered magnetite would not have been very effective .

At that time , the Yellow River was flooding , causing widespread devastation to the people and the rice harvests . As Luan Da had claimed that he could dam the river , Emperor Wu felt that it would be wise to encourage the mystic to take up the task by quickly pleasing him . The emperor granted Luan Da the title of the General of Five Boons , and almost as an afterthought , three other such titles : the General of Heavenly Practitioners , the General of the Earth Practitioners , and General Grand Communicator . Emperor Wu also lavished gifts on him ; he was granted the marquise of Letong , giving him some 2 @,@ 000 households to rule over , and the emperor also gave him a luxurious mansion , a thousand servants , opulent transportation , many decorations , a seal labelled " General of Heavenly Way " , and even the hand in marriage of Princess Wei Zifu , the emperor 's eldest daughter , accompanied by a dowry estimated at 10 @,@ 000 catties of gold . The emperor himself , along with envoys , members of the royal family , and high @-@ ranking officials often invited Luan Da to dine or paid him house calls merely to ask how he was doing . With his marquise and five generalships , Luan Da had become a man of great standing only a few months after his introduction to the emperor . He was no longer merely Emperor Wu 's subject , but an envoy of the immortal beings with status equal to the emperor .

In possession of these newly @-@ bestowed honours , Luan Da spent every evening at home , attempting to summon spirits . According to the Shih ji , no spirits appeared , but only " a multitude of ghosts who gathered around " . These , the text claims , he was able to command . The Shih ji 's author , Sima Qian , was scornful of Luan Da , noting that " Everyone on the seacoast of Yan and Qi began waving their arms about , declaring that they possessed secret arts and could summon spirits and immortal ones . " Indeed , Luan Da 's dramatic growth in reputation and stature became a great topic of discussion in the Han capital of Chang 'an , and mystics were eager to imitate his success .

= = = Fall from power and death = = =

By the summer after his elevation , Luan Da had forgotten the emperor 's request for an audience with the immortals . Emperor Wu , anxious to achieve immortality , sent an envoy to remind his court mystic of his task . Luan Da attempted to delay , but eventually realised he had to appease the emperor and allay his suspicions . The mystic decided to put on an act of journeying to meet the immortals . With a group of followers , he travelled to Shandong . Emperor Wu , however , was already suspicious , and sent a spy to follow Luan Da .

The spy followed the court mystic to Mount Tai , where he performed a ritual with his followers , although no one saw any immortals . Luan Da ordered his followers to stay behind while he went ahead to meet the immortals , telling them that the spiritual beings would not descend to meet with lowly servants . The spy tailed Luan Da as he went forth alone , but only saw the mystic walk along the beach . Luan Da returned to his group and reported that he had seen his immortal master and that they were to report back to the emperor . Angered by Luan Da 's deceit , the spy rushed back to the capital before the mystic to inform Emperor Wu . The emperor , incensed at Luan Da 's confidence tricks , decided to play along when the mystic returned to see what lies he would tell .

When Luan Da returned , he told the emperor of his falsified meeting with the immortals ; however , he sensed that the emperor did not believe him . Before long , the emperor broke out in a rage , ordering Luan Da to tell what he had actually done . Dumbfounded , Luan Da attempted to continue his lies ; however , the emperor called for the spy to come forth and expose the lies . Lost for words , Luan Da was arrested on Emperor Wu 's order , and executed by having his body chopped into two at the waist . The emperor extended his fury to the Marquess of Lecheng for introducing Luan Da , having him beheaded and his body then defiled .

Later in the Han Dynasty , mystics like Luan gradually lost their influence as the rulers passed many laws against them . Mediums were not allowed to barter their crafts alongside roads , and some were even forbidden to make a living at such a craft at all . Those married to shamans were not even allowed to hold government office , though this law was often bypassed . Luan Da 's fall signaled the beginning of the end for these mystics .