

4.7 THE ARTS OF THE *FANGSHI*

The term *fangshi* 方士 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, denoting the class of men of talent emerging during the Classical era. Ultimately it came to have a meaning rhetorically similar to “gentleman.” Thus the name *fangshi* denotes a man of attainments with some special method or secret formula. As the narrative accounts concerning the First Emperor and Wu-di have made clear, these men sometimes became very influential 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 fangshi traditions

The *Shiji* traces the rise of the *fangshi* to the naturalist philosopher Zou Yan (whom we met in the reading on Warring States Naturalism), but it is likely that the identification of *fangshi* origins in Zou Yan’s ideas was basically a creation of historical memory, providing *fangshi* with some intellectual pedigree and granting a certain legitimacy to their styles of practice. But some connection does seem likely. Certainly there is a resonance between Zou Yan’s ideas and some *fangshi* schools. *Fangshi* 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 *fangshi* movement seems to have originated on the Shandong peninsula, moving north along the coast of Bohai Bay. Perhaps Zou Yan, whose career included a celebrated move along that same coast from residence at Jixia in Qi to the state of Yan, helped carry these ideas north during the third century B.C.

One of the most frequent points of native origin of individual *fangshi* was the region of Langye, on the southern coast of the Shandong peninsula, although there is no record of Langye as a major population center to explain why so many *fangshi* originated there. The region takes its name from a seaport that played a pivotal role in Qin Dynasty history. 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 fatal final journey. But Langye also had an intriguing and puzzling history during the pre-Qin era.

During the fifth century B.C. the southern state of Yue, which was located down the coast about 400 miles, established a beachhead in Langye. What is more, the rulers of Yue later relocated their capital from south of the Yangzi to Langye, where it remained for about a century. The rationale and logistics of locating a detached capital far north of Yue’s center of population in an area generally regarded as a part of Qi are not documented, but it seems quite possible that as the state of Yue progressed towards its gradual extinction during the Warring States era, it

became increasingly dependent on seacoast trade, which would have not have been subject to disruption by the expanding southern power of the rival state of Chu. Langye was the midpoint of five great coastal seaports of the Classical era, with the Spring and Autumn era capital of Yue one port south and the capital of Qi (where Jixia was located) the next port north. It seems a reasonable hypothesis – though far from a demonstrated theory – that many of the ideas basic to the rise of *fangshi* were intellectual artifacts imported to Jixia, the vibrant mid-Warring States era center of intellectual development, from Yue through seacoast trade that its detached capital site was designed to control.

If this ultimately proved to be the case, it would suggest that *fangshi* practices may have had their roots in non-Zhou cultures of the south. As we saw when we investigated the Chinese Neolithic, Shandong was the home of the Longshan Culture, which seems clearly ancestral in many respects to the Bronze Age cultures of the North China plains, but the region immediately south and stretching through the Yangzi Delta was the home of the Liangzhu Culture, which vanished about 2000 B.C. At the meeting point of those two ancient cultures, as well as of the later similarly distinct cultures of Qi and Yue, Langye may have represented a gateway through which non-Zhou traditions of the ancient southeast coastal tribes continued to flow into mainstream Zhou culture prior to the gradual blunting of regional distinction during the early centuries of the Imperial era.

Varieties of fangshi arts

Most of our accounts of *fangshi* 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 *fangshi*, though the names of some *fangshi* manuals are recorded in the *History of the Former Han*.

What sorts of arts did *fangshi* 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 *fangshi* repertoire.

Fangshi 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 – divination by bird calls, wind angles, bamboo cracks – seem simply bizarre (until one reflects on crystal balls and tarot cards).

Fangshi and Han ideologies

The *fangshi* cults did not constitute a single ideology. Drawing heavily on five-forces cosmology, *fangshi* 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 *fangshi* 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 *fangshi*. It was, in fact, recognized during the Han that there was significant overlap between these two groups. *Fangshi*, 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 fangshi

Fangshi 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 *fangshi* 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 two centuries and more, we can nevertheless look to them for some insight into the way that *fangshi* 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 Biography of Yang You

Yang You, whose polite name was Aihou (Marquis Ai) was a native of Chengdu in Shu (modern Sichuan). As a youth he studied the *Yi jing* and augmented that with the arts of governance of the seven planets, primal pneuma, wind and clouds, and meteorognostics.* He served as a commandery scholar.

From time to time, wild magpies would flock together at night on the tower of the city armory. The commandery warden Lian Fan asked Yang You about this. Yang replied, "This portends a minor military action within the commandery, but it will do no harm." About twenty days later, the Manyi tribes of Guangrou County rebelled, killing the magistrate and his officers. The commandery sent an armed militia to subdue them.

Later the wood writing tablets in the warden's office were scattered by a wind. The warden asked Yang about it. Yang replied, "Someone will soon present a gift of fruit from a

*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.

tree. Its color will be orange.” Shortly thereafter, an officer-at-large came to present the warden several bundles of tangerines.

Once, Yang was drinking with some companions. He cautioned the driver of his carriage saying, “After the third round of drinking you will do well to prepare the carriage for our departure.” And once the time had come, he hurried off. Later that night, at the home of the host, a fight broke out among the guests and one was murdered. When asked how he had anticipated this, Yang You explained, “There were pigeons fighting in the tree that faces the local alter to the earth god. This is a portent of armed bandits.”

Yang You’s predictions were generally correct. He wrote a book of more than ten chapters called *The Even Balance*. He died at home. (*Hou Han shu* 82A.2716)

Note in Yang You’s biography the wide range of mantic arts in which he had trained: *Yi jing* studies, astrology, and a variety of traditions of reading the future from the natural environment. Presumably, it was his mastery of the *Yi jing*, which was an item in the Confucian canon as well as a popular divination text (as it is today) that earned him his role as a locally appointed scholar. However, in his biography he chiefly seems to serve as mantic advisor to the commandery warden, and the prognostications of which we learn are exclusively drawn from his mastery of reading the natural environment, likely based on a body of folklore without connection to orthodox systems of learning like the *Yi jing*.

The Biography of Zhao Yan

Zhao Yan was a native of Langye. As a youth he studied the esoteric arts. In the third year of the Yanxi reign period of Emperor Huan (A.D. 160), bandits led by a man from Langye named Lao Bing and bandits led by Shusun Wuji of Mt. Tai killed the commandery colonel, laid siege to the district towns under Langye’s jurisdiction and overran them, cruelly murdering officials and the population. The imperial court appointed Zong Zi of Nanyang as General of the Guard for Suppression of Bandits. Gripping the staff and battle ax of command, he set off with the troops of several regional commanderies in a combined attack on Shusun Wuji.

Advising Zong Zi, Zhao Yan laid out a strategy for the campaign that was based on the art of Orphans and Voids.* The bandits were at that time encamped in Ju. In the vicinity of Ju were five places with “*yang*” in their names. Zhao said the appropriate plan would be to deploy troops had been called up from five commanderies that also had the word *yang* in their names, thus relying on “orphans” to attack “voids” in suppressing the bandits. Zong Zi presented Zhao Yan’s plan to the emperor, who issued an edict dispatching troops from five *yang* commanderies to the region.

*This art employed 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.”

Zhao Yan next 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 thoroughly routed and their fortified encampment burned to the ground. In no time the provinces of Xu and Yan were pacified. (*Hou Han shu* 82B.2732)

In contrast to Yang You, Zhao Yan seems to have been more of a conventional specialist. Both of the arts mentioned here depend on manipulation of the sexagenary system, perhaps reflecting narrower training. Moreover, the implication is that he has been attached to Zong Zi's command as a mantic military aide with Imperial sanction. If this was indeed his profile, Zhao Yan's brief biography suggests a Han *fangshi* equivalent to court divination specialists we see using plastromancy or *Yi jing* arts during the Classical era: a bureaucrat using mechanistic training and interpretive intuition to find state employment, rather than a man like Yang You, who was also skilled in reading the meaning of environmental omens for his own benefit as well as a patron's.

The Biographies of Xu Deng and Zhao Bing

Xu Deng was a native of Minzhong (modern Fujian). Originally he was a woman, but he changed into a man. He was skilled as a spirit-medium.** Zhao Bing, whose style name was Gong-a, was a native of Dongyang (in the Yangzi Delta) and he was able to work the spells of the Yue region.*** During a period when the chaos of widespread war had let loose deadly epidemics, the two men met on the banks of the Wushang River. Their meeting ended with a vow to bond together and apply their arts in healing the sick. They said to one another, "Now that our aspirations are joined as one, let us each put his abilities to the test!"

Thereupon, Xu Deng issued an interdiction upon the waters and the river ceased to flow. Next Zhao Bing cast a spell on a dead withered tree and instantly buds sprang forth. The two men looked at each other and laughed, then they set off walking a single way.

Xu Deng was the older man, and Zhao Bing served him as his teacher. They set great store by purity and frugality: when performing ritual *li* for the spirits they used for the wine-libations only water taken from streams flowing eastward, and for the meat offerings only bark peeled from mulberry trees. They employed no methods other than spells of exorcism, but they drove the illness from all whom they treated.

After Xu Deng died, Zhao Bing traveled to east to Zhang'an where people did not know him. One day, carrying a cauldron onto the thatched roof of a home there, he lit a fire, and cooked a meal. When the owner of the house saw him he cried out in panicked alarm,

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

**Mediums were frequently women. This may be why Xu or his biographer decided he'd been one.

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

but Zhao merely smiled and, making no response, waited for his food to cook. When it was done, the roof was completely undamaged and unmarked.

Another time Zhao wished to cross a river but no boatmen there would agree to take him. So he spread out a mat, sat down upon it, and with a long whistle calling up the wind to deflect the current of the water he sailed across to the other side.

Subsequently the common people regarded him as they would a spirit and followed him in crowds. The magistrate of Zhang'an judged him a fraud misleading the masses and had him arrested and executed. The people built a shrine for him in Yongkang, so pure that to this day even tiny gnats cannot enter it. (*Hou Han shu* 82B.2741-42)

In Xu Deng and Zhao Bing, we see a different type of *fangshi* tradition, one that relies less on detection and prescription and more on simple magical spells and feats. It seems likely that men with reputations of this sort had flourished from earlier times, but reports of them proliferate as Chinese culture moves towards the medieval period. Ultimately, from the late Han Dynasty of the second century A.D. on, the growth of mass religious traditions associated with Daoism and Buddhism becomes a rich ground for faith in these sorts of charismatic figures to grow.

Sources:

Dozens of biographical notices of *fangshi*, most very brief, are collected in the *History of the Latter Han* (*Hou Han shu*), compiled by the historian Fan Ye. This text, composed during the fifth century A.D., was a government commissioned work. Joined with the Sima Qian's *Shiji* and the first century historian Ban Gu's *Han shu* (known as the *History of the Former Han*), both of which were initially the private work of court historians, the *History of the Latter Han* established a tradition of authorized historical compendia that ultimately produced 24 enormous government-sponsored historical compendia, largely modeled on the *Shiji*, each recording to the taste of a subsequent dynasty's rulers the events of the preceding dynasty that it had supplanted. The significance for us here is that these accounts of *fangshi*, for all their wondrous and unorthodox elements, are found in a book authorized as orthodox by a dynastic court (the brief fifth century Liu-Song Dynasty of the Yangzi Delta region), reflecting the accepted cultural role that *fangshi* ultimately came to play.

The biographies of *fangshi* that appear in the early dynastic histories are collected, introduced, and translated in Kenneth DeWoskin, *Doctors, Diviners, and Magicians of Ancient China: Biographies of Fangshi* (Columbia University, 1983).

Those who enjoy watching dramatic movies of the Chinese martial arts tradition should recognize in the combinations of training and magical skills portrayed there one line of descent of the *fangshi* tradition.