

YE Fashan (631-720)

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Ye Fashan, a celebrated figure both in his own day and throughout medieval times, is remarkable in that he fit few of the common patterns for Tang Taoists. He apparently wrote nothing, never held ecclesiastical office or associated with other historical Taoists, and may not even have been a *daoshi* at all. Yet, he was not only the subject of numerous later tales, but was honored in his own lifetime for his achievements as a thaumaturgical hero: he employed ritual powers and spirit-helpers to perform countless amazing rescues, saving ladies and gentlemen, emperors and courtiers, from death, disease, demons, coups, and unprincipled sorcerers. What will confound the modern mind is that his thaumaturgic exploits earned admiration and respect by centuries of emperors, officials, and historians.

Beginning with a panegyric epitaph by the emperor Xuanzong in 739, we have more than twenty substantial accounts of Ye's life, in the dynastic histories (*Jiu Tangshu* 192.5107-8; *Xin Tangshu* 204.5805) and other court documents, as well as in numerous Taoist collections (e.g., Du Guangting's *Daojiao lingyan chi* 14.8a-9a). Those accounts report that Ye was the scion of an ancient and noble house, whose father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had all been proficient in arcane arts. The father and grandfather received imperial honors in 713 and 717. Perhaps for that reason, Ye was always a figure of imperial significance, despite the fact that he had little connection with the cultural elite or with the Taoist leadership (e.g., *zongshi* like Sima Chengzhen). He was courted by five Tang rulers (from Gaozong to Xuanzong), and in the 739 epitaph he is already lauded as an immortal who had applied his subtle powers to protect ruler and nation from disloyal ministers and rebels alike. In a 9th-century text (Jiang Fang's *Huanxi zhi*, in *Tangdai congshu* 32.6a-9a), three deities revealed to him that he was a "banished immortal" (*zhexian*), a heavenly official who had been lax in copying the sacred registers (*lu*) and had consequently been banished to live as a mortal until he had built up sufficient merit (by good deeds toward others) to return to his heavenly station. That image guided most later

accounts of Ye's life, especially the extensive *Tang Ye zhenren zhuan* (HY778: TT557), by the obscure 13th-century Taoist Zhang Daotong. Zhang essentially embroidered the already-substantial account of Ye that had appeared in the 11th-century *Taiping guangji* (216.170-74). Each is replete with ahistorical elements, and qualify as historical fiction, but they do weave a complex and fascinating image of Ye as a moral and spiritual exemplar for all people: he benefitted "civilian and military, Han and foreign, male and female, children and youths," and his meritorious activities, in faithful service to grateful rulers, served to integrate the cosmos, uniting the world above, the world below, and every corner of the world of men, from imperial court to the most distant frontier.

Even the earliest texts report that Ye ascended as an immortal in broad daylight, 12 July 720. He quickly became a legendary figure, and accounts of his exploits expanded widely for centuries.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Cadonna 1984; Kirkland 1986: 126-46, 366-443; Kirkland 1992: 47-86 (translation and analysis of the early biographies); Kirkland 1993: 43-70 (translation and analysis of *Taiping guangji* account); Barrett 1996: 33, 52.

SEE ALSO: *shijie*, *zhexian*
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