

Shamelessness Shouldn't Be Anyone's Nature

—An Open Letter to *Nature* (Part VI)

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A fake scientist's fight against science

Fang's sudden rise in China at the turn of the centuries had a lot to do with the hypes manipulated by a group of professors of history or philosophy of science at Peking University (such as Dr. Liu Huajie), Tsinghua University (such as [Dr. Liu Bing](#)), and Shanghai Jiao Tong University (such as [Dr. Jiang Xiaoyuan](#)), who call themselves “scientific intellectuals” (“科学文化人”). However, the honeymoon between Fang and the “scientific intellectuals” was essentially over by the end of 2001. And by the end of 2002, this group of people became Fang's most hated enemies in China. How did that happen? Although personal and private matters were involved, as Fang openly admitted, the split was indeed triggered by a scientific issue, at least it appeared so. The story is very important to the understanding of Fang's background, his personality, his behavioral pattern, and his so called “standing up for science” and “looking for evidence” activities, so I'll tell it in detail.

In late 2001, Mr. Ke Zhiyang, one of Dr. Liu Bing's graduate students at Tsinghua University, engaged in a heated debate with Fang on a book written by a British geneticist “known for her critical views on genetic engineering,” Dr. [Mae-Wan Ho](#). The book's title is *Genetic Engineering: Dream or Nightmare?* Dr. Liu Bing recommended the book for the “*Newton - Science World Cup Popular Science Books Award*.” However, Fang identified the book as a “typical anti-scientific and pseudoscientific book” only “after turning a few pages” (Original Chinese: “我翻了一下，认为是典型的反科学、伪科学著作”), and he openly expressed his opinion on the *New Thread*, through email to the judges of the award, and in *China Reading Weekly*. (Fang Zhouzi. *Dream or Nightmare is not a popular science book*. 《〈美梦还是噩梦〉不是科普著作》). Fang's opinion virtually made Dr. Ho's book become one of the only two books on the candidate list which didn't win the award (there were 32 candidate books, 10 won first class award, 20 won second class award. See: Tao Shilong. *The gain and loss of 2001 Newton - Science World Cup Popular Science Books Award*. 《2001年〈牛顿-科学世界杯〉科普图书评奖的得与失》).

Why would a person who was “trained as a biochemist” issue a death sentence to a book about genetic engineering? How could a person who is famous for his ignorance in his own specialty identify a “typical anti-scientific and pseudoscientific book” only after turning a few pages? Although we do not definite have answers to these questions, we do have some clues.

According to Fang, a few months before he encountered Dr. Ho's book, he was hired by an U. S. bio-information or bio-informatics company as a consulting scientist. (The Chinese words were “生物信息公司,” which literally means Bio-information Company, but Fang told Xiong Lei, a reporter with Xinhua News Agency and a contributor to *Science* magazine, that the company was of bio-informatics. See: Xiong Lei. 2001. [Biochemist Wages Online War Against Ethical Lapses](#). *Science* 293:1039.) Fang would change the company's nature to biotech two years later. Till today, Fang has been refusing to reveal information about the company's identity, its legal name, its address, its business, and what kind of consulting service it needed from “biochemist” Fang. However, even though Fang shuts his mouth tightly, his action speaks much louder: almost at the same time he was hired by this mysterious bio-company,

Fang suddenly became, and still is, the most vocal and fanatic propagandist of transgenic food in China. Since Fang didn't have a clear position on the issues of transgenic food before this employment, and Fang has a history of deciding his position based on his personal interest, such as his love and hate affair with TCM (see [Part IV of this Open Letter](#)), it is fair to say that Fang's attack on Dr. Ho's book was not accidental, and it was not about science either. (For more information about and analysis of the relationship between Fang and the bio-company, please see: Yi Ming. *Scifool writer Fang Zhouzi*. Chapter 6. *Investigation on the background of "Bioinformatician Fang Zhouzi"* 《[科唬作家方舟子](#)》).

Bear that "bio-information" in mind, let's move back to our story. Dr. Liu Bing didn't respond to Fang's attack on Dr. Ho's book, but his student Mr. Ke Zhiyang did. On Dec. 7, 2001, Mr. Ke published an article in *Science and Technology Daily*, gave a positive introduction to Dr. Ho's book, but avoided confrontation against Fang. (Ke Zhiyang. *Genetic Engineering: Dream or Nightmare* 《[遗传工程：美梦还是噩梦](#)》). Fang was very upset with Mr. Ke's article, so he wrote a lengthy retaliatory article one week later to attack both Dr. Ho and Mr. Ke, the combative tone of the article was perfectly reflected in its title: *The idiotic nonsense about genetic engineering* (《[对遗传工程的痴人说梦](#)》). In the article, Fang listed five characteristics of anti-scientific and pseudoscientific people or their publications, which were also present in Dr. Ho and her book. The first such characteristic was "the author does not have academic qualification for criticizing (science)" (Original Chinese: "作者并不具有批评的学术资格"). This allegation by itself is funny enough, since Dr. Ho, according to [her CV](#), had authored multiple scientific books and textbooks, and published more than 80 research papers in refereed journals, including *Science* and *Nature*, before 2001. It is even funnier when we compare Fang's own meager qualification with Dr. Ho's. However, this is not important to our story.

Among the nearly 4,000 Chinese characters in Fang's article, the following 200-plus characters, which constituted Fang's third allegation against Dr. Ho, "using disputable or even overturned views as mainstream conclusions" (Original Chinese: "把有争议的、甚至已被推翻的观点当成定论"), was the most important part, and Mr. Ke would later describe it "coming from the biology area where he is most qualified to speak, and it seems the most professional, most academic, most convincing in the entire article" (Original Chinese: "这个抨击来自他最有资格发言的生物学领域，在全文看起来是最具专业水准、最有学术价值、最令人信服的"), and the debate was also focused on this part, so I translate it in its entirety:

"Another characteristic of anti-scientific and pseudoscientific people is that they use some preliminary results as evidence to support their own views, and intentionally or unintentionally overlook the opposite results or disputes. Mae-Wan Ho used this trick repeatedly in her book. For example, to demonstrate that the acquired traits are inheritable, she used a significant part of her book to introduce the bacterial 'directed mutation' or 'adaptive mutation' discovered by John Cairns in the late 1980s. (See Chinese translation pp.126-128), and used it to attack neo-Darwinism. The fact is, long before her English book was published (in 1998), there were many evidences showing that this kind of mutation is not Lamarckian, but Darwinian, it was an illusion caused by 'hypermutation.' Even John Cairns himself had accepted the conclusion. However, Ho still used it to attack Darwinism. If it was not because she was ignorant, it must be because she intentionally wanted to mislead." (Original Chinese: "为了支持自己的结论，把一些非常初步的结果当成定论做为证据，而有意忽视相反的结果和争议，是反科学、伪科学者的另一特征。侯美婉在书中反复用到这一手段。比如，为了证明后天获得性能够遗传，她花了很大篇幅介绍约翰·凯伦斯 (John Cairns) 在 80 年代末发现的细菌的“定向突变”或“适应性突变” (见中译本 pp.126-128)，并以此抨击新达尔文主义。而事实上，早在她的英文原著出版 (1998 年) 以前，已有众多的证据证明这种突变并非拉马克式的，而还是达尔文式的，是“超突变” (hypermutation) 造成的假象。连凯伦斯本人也已接受了这个结论，而侯却还在

以此攻击达尔文主义，若非无知，就是有意的误导。”)

In response to Fang's attack to Dr. Ho, as well as to himself, Mr. Ke wrote another article, *The beautiful dream of an amateur rationalist* (《江湖理性主义者的美梦》). Note: Fang refused to publish Mr. Ke's articles on "his *New Threads* website" in its original form. Rather, he published a version of the article inserted with paragraphic comments made by Mr. Zhao Nanyuan, a professor at Tsinghua University and one of Fang's hardcore fans. So the title of the article was *Zhao Nanyuan comments on Wulongcha's The beautiful dream of an amateur rationalist*. ([《赵南元点评乌龙茶〈江湖理性主义者的美梦〉》](#)). Wulongcha was Mr. Ke's penname.) Mr. Ke's article was twice as long as Fang's *The idiotic nonsense about genetic engineering*, it is impossible for me to summarize the entire article here, so let's just look at his response to Fang's "most professional, most academic, most convincing" part.

Mr. Ke provided several evidences to refute Dr. Fang: First, he demonstrated that Dr. Ho did mention hypermutation in her book, and she did admit in her book that hypermutation was one of the mechanisms for adaptive mutation, therefore the person who "intentionally or unintentionally overlook[s] the opposite evidence" was not Dr. Ho, but Fang himself. Second, Mr. Ke provided [a paper published in 2000 by John Cairns](#), which clearly states: "As mentioned earlier, Bull et al. have gone further and have proposed that virtually all mutations arise in hypermutators. This contradicts the available evidence." So Fang's statement, "John Cairns himself has accepted the conclusion," was either ignorant, or intentionally misleading. Third, Mr. Ke found another paper (Rosche WA, Foster PL. 1999. [The role of transient hypermutators in adaptive mutation in *Escherichia coli*](#). PNAS 96:6862-6867) which concludes by this sentence: "the hypermutators are responsible for nearly all multiple mutations but produce only $\approx 10\%$ of the adaptive Lac⁺ mutations." Thus Fang's statement that adaptive mutation "was an illusion caused by 'hypermutation'" was falsified. Mr. Ke also pointed out, based on the above paper, that the research or debates on the adaptive mutation are normal academic activities inside the scientific community, they are not life-and-death struggles between science and anti-science forces. The most damaging evidences Mr. Ke provided were the email messages he received from Dr. John Cairns and Dr. James A. Shapiro of University of Chicago, they all confirmed that Mr. Ke's understandings about adaptive mutation or Dr. John Cairns' position were correct.

As mentioned before, the most frightening thing to Fang, as well as to every imposter, is the exposure of his ignorance, so one can imagine how deeply Fang was hurt by Mr. Ke's article. More importantly, Mr. Ke claimed that he had only high school biology background. How could an American Ph. D. afford of such a defeat and humiliation in front of the "scientific intellectuals" who were also his strongest supporters? So he responded by publishing an article entitled *An ignorant and presumptuous person majoring humanities raving about genetics* (《[“文史哲”妄人胡说遗传学](#)》) on Dec. 23, 2001. Here is one piece of Fang's argument:

"It really makes people wonder whether they should laugh or cry that a person who majors in humanities, based on his meager qualification of high school biology, spent a half day on an 'in-depth study,' read a dozen or so recent important literatures in genetics, then he thought he knew more genetics than a person who has received his biochemistry doctor's degree in the area of molecular genetics, who has conducted frontier research in molecular genetics for more than ten years, who, although no longer conducts research personally, but due to his job's nature, reads the newest papers in molecular biology almost every day. That person reprimanded me 'posing as an expert, pretending as a mainstream representative,' exposed me spreading 'true lies.'" (Original Chinese: "一个搞'文史哲'出身的人, 临时抱佛脚, '仅凭高中生物学的微薄'资历', 用了半天时间'深入研究'了一下, 查阅了十几篇近年来重要的遗传学专业文献', 就自以为比一位拿了分子遗传学研究方向的生物化学博士、做过十来年分子遗传学前沿研究、至今虽然不再从事具体研究但因为工作需要几乎每天都还在阅读分子生物学的最新论文的人更懂遗传

学，训斥我‘冒充专家，谎称主流’，揭露我散布了‘真正的谎言’，实在是令人啼笑皆非。”)

Here is another piece of Fang’s argument:

“There are countless biology professionals among the readers of the *New Threads*. If what I said was wrong, was a lie, my email box would have been jammed with letters of criticism, why do we need a humanities person to jump out? Why there is not a single professional standing up to correct me? Do you think it is a conspiracy also?” (Original Chinese: “世界各地阅读新语丝网站的生物学专业人士不计其数，如果我这段话有专业问题，是公然撒谎，我的信箱早被纠正信塞满了，哪里用得着一个学‘文史哲’的出来？为什么至今没有一个专业人士来指教我，难道这里面也有阴谋？”)

Does anyone still remember that to fight off Dr. Liu Huajie in English, Fang pretended that he had “studied” in the U. S. for 13 years? He requested an English expert to testify? (See [Part V of this Open Letter](#).) That was in 2003. And in 2001, Fang used the similar strategies to fight off Mr. Ke in genetics.

First, he used his major (biology) to counter Mr. Ke’s major (humanities), which is a typical way of Fang’s positivist thinking: natural science is more solid and higher in the ladder of knowledge than humanities, so the people who study natural science are smarter and higher in rank than those who study humanities. That’s why Fang repeated the word “humanities” more than a dozen times in his article.

【Note: Fang’s exact word was “文史哲,” which means literary, history, and philosophy. Fang’s contempt to humanities or any subjects other than natural science is evidenced by a term he uses for humanities people frequently, “liberal arts silly girls” or “humanities silly girls” (“文科傻妞”), which is one of the major reasons why Fang has so many supporters in China’s science community.】

Second, Fang padded his resumé by changing his specialty from biochemistry to molecular genetics, just like he would change it to biomedicine five years later to promote his books, so his real specialty could be whatever he wants, and whenever he wants. He also padded his research experience from less than 8 years to “more than ten years,” and he forgot he had told the world less than two years ago that what he did was brainless “‘bench work’, ……one day is more than enough to plan a whole year’s experiments.”

Third, he was obviously lying when he said he “reads the newest papers in molecular biology almost every day.” How could a person who didn’t read the bible in his area while he was a student read, aimlessly, countless molecular biology papers every day?

Fourth, he used an unverifiable fact that no one had criticized him as an evidence to prove his correctness. This is a typical trick of “[argument from silence](#)” which Fang would use repeatedly during his career of “standing up for science.” As a matter of fact, to validate this kind of argument, Fang has an obligation to demonstrate that most people would like to risk his professional career and private life to engage a fight with a professional “fighter.” As a matter of fact, one of the most important parts of Fang’s “job” has been to scare off these people — Dr. Xiao Chuanguo is a living example. Therefore, Fang’s trick is basically a circular argument.

So, how did the debate end? Briefly, Mr. Ke wrote a comment on Fang’s *An ignorant and presumptuous person majoring humanities raving about genetics*, and Fang wrote [a comment on Mr. Ke’s comment](#) on December 24, 2001, in which Fang declared, “I do not entangle with this Zhu Haijun-type person. This is my final reply. I will ignore his further responses.” (Original Chinese: “我不跟这种朱海军式的人物纠缠，最后回答一下。以后的答复不再理睬。” Note: Zhu Haijun was a person who had debated with

Fang on multiple issues. He died in 2000.) This is a typical way of Fang's to end a war which he has no hope to win, but at the same time, he wants his audience to believe that he has won.

However, on January 5, 2002, Fang broke his own word by publishing two articles on the *New Threads*: “*Humanities scientist fabricates Mendel literatures: New example of academic corruption*” (《“文史哲科学家”伪造孟德尔文献——学术腐败新例子》), and *The ironclad evidence that “Humanities scientist” Ke Zhiyang copied reference randomly* (《“文史哲科学家”柯志阳乱抄参考文献的铁证》). What happened?

A few days before Fang gave his Parthian shot, Mr. Ke sent an article discussing Mendelian paradox through email to a 22-people group which didn't include Fang. Mr. Ke also attached a list of “relevant literatures” (“相关文献”) in the email. Somehow, Fang got the email, and found that some literatures on the “relevant literatures” list had nothing to do with Mendelian paradox. So he used this as an evidence to accuse Mr. Ke of “faking a reference list to pretend knowledgeable, and swagger and deceive other people,” (“伪造文献冒充博学招摇撞骗”), so he “has no minimum academic ethics, openly lies, forges literatures, and does not deserve to do academic studies” (“没有起码的学术道德，公然撒谎、伪造文献的人，根本不配做学问”).

Remember in 2003 Fang tried to link Dr. Liu Huajie's supposed bad English to “academic corruption”? To Mr. Ke, he used the same trick. In other words, if Fang could not defeat his opponents scientifically or academically in a scholastic manner, he would destroy them politically or personally, by whatever means he could use, even if it is illegal or criminal. In Mr. Ke's case, Fang did it by publishing a stolen private email with a lot of false accusations.

The debate between Fang and Ke probably is the only real “scientific debate” Fang has ever engaged, even though his original purpose might have nothing to do with science. Since then, except for a few debates about transgenic food, Fang has tried his best to avoid such lengthy, thorough, and deep debates on science, even though he has all the time in the world to quarrel or fight with others about anything else. To his personal enemies, he'd like to use English as a weapon to destroy their professional reputation, or simply label them with tags such as “[superstition](#), [pseudoscience](#), [anti-science](#),” academic corruption, faker, etc.

Is this the person the sponsors and the organizer of John Maddox Prize “truly honoured” to award or reward? What for?

(To be continued.)

Previous parts of my *Open Letter to Nature*:

[Part I](#)

[Part II](#)

[Part III](#)

[Part IV](#)

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