

*A Cultural Reflection:  
The Auspicious Sign in Miscellaneous Notes of the Tang Dynasty (618-907)*

Tse Yiu Kay, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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**Abstract**

The belief in auspicious sign from the scientific point of view may probably be regarded as a kind of superstition, but for many of the people in their nations, it has become a part of their folk culture. Such a belief comes basically from the fondness and seeking of auspiciousness which should be ordinary and common in people's psychology. For the Chinese, not only mythological beliefs and various thoughts like Confucianism have been involved in the propitious interpretations but also a symbolic association with the recognition from Heaven on the performance of the ruling class to consolidate the regime has been made all through the dynasties.

This paper gives a focused study on the auspicious sign of the Táng Dynasty (618-907). With quoted examples from the Táng miscellaneous notes and the use of supporting documentation such as official historic records, it elaborates and analyses the Táng auspicious sign from cultural perspective. Discussions and comments are concisely made on (1) the classification and cultural context of various signs relating to natural phenomena (e.g. snow falls in lunar March), animals (e.g. a white fox appears in people's house), birds (e.g. white magpies nest in human's living area), plants (e.g. pear trees blossom in winter) and objects (e.g. stone), (2) Táng people's attitudes towards the signs and their opposite interpretations on the same sign, and (3) the factors like Confucianism in developing the auspicious concepts and signs to be part of the Chinese culture.

Keywords: auspicious sign, Chinese folk culture, miscellaneous notes, Táng Dynasty

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## Introduction

There are different terms for the auspicious sign in Chinese documentation, such as xiángruì (祥瑞), fúruì (符瑞), ruìyīng (瑞应), jiārui (嘉瑞), zhēnxiáng (祯祥), fúyīng (福应). The belief in auspicious sign, which comes basically from human's natural and common psychological pursuit of propitious life and avoidance of ominous incurrence, has long existed since ancient times. People's worship of Heaven and different kinds or forms of spirits or gods is closely associated with the calling down of blessings. Totem, for example, symbolizes what a tribe worships and believes in the blessing power.

It is generally regarded that the interpretation and use of auspicious sign in the Hàn Dynasty (202BC-220) have been intentionally taken as an effective measure to strengthen an emperor's regime. Dǒng Zhòngshū (董仲舒), one of the most representative and significant advocators, has raised his saying on the correspondence between Heaven and mankind (天人感应): The auspicious signs conferred by Heaven are the recognition and appreciation of the emperor's ruling achievement, and on the contrary, the ominous signs denote the unsatisfactory performance of the ruling class. The penetration of Confucian thought into the auspicious and ominous signs, with the objective of exhorting the emperor to implement benevolent policy, has further developed with the combined use of divination by augury and mystical interpretation of Confucianism texts (讖纬) as well as yīn-yáng and the five elements (阴阳五行). As the auspicious sign can gain benefits both for the emperor's personal reputation and the stability of his regime, the use of various auspicious signs has been more and more popular in Hàn and the later dynasties.

Following the customs of Wèi, Jīn and the Southern and Northern Dynasties (220-589), there are official historical records showing the popularity of the interpretation and use of auspicious signs in the Táng Dynasty. For example, according to *Xīn Táng Shū* (新唐书), there have already been 134 types of auspicious signs in 4 categories: the greatest auspiciousness (大瑞) relating to particular natural phenomena like the morale star and colorful clouds, and holy animals like the Chinese unicorn, phoenix, tortoise and dragon; the upper level auspiciousness (上瑞) relating to certain animals like white wolf and red rabbit; the middle level auspiciousness (中瑞) relating to birds like eagle and red wild goose; the lower level auspiciousness (下瑞) relating to plants like fine grain and two trees with branches interlocked.

The miscellaneous notes or bǐjì (笔记) is a sort of writings or miscellany covering a broad array of themes and subjects included in various descriptions such as anecdotes, reading notes, tales and criticisms. The miscellaneous contents, as narrated by Táng writers, can help to provide a particular sort of information other than the official historic records and is worthy of reference. In the following section, examples of auspicious signs are drawn from the notes and analyzed from cultural perspective.

### Auspicious signs

(a) Pear trees blossom in winter

*Xuān Shì Zhì* (宣室志) noted that there were pear trees in a garden owned by a man

called Liáng (梁). During the regime of Wénzōng (文宗) in the Táng Dynasty, the trees suddenly blossomed in a lush growth after a snowfall in winter. Liáng felt very strange and thought the blossom was an auspicious sign. But he was then told by another person that the sign could not be auspicious since it was abnormal to the natural growth of a tree in the seasonal cycle. Liáng was unhappy and his father died just after a month and more.

Auspicious signs relating to plants are classified to be lower level auspiciousness. They may not be the major targets advocated by the ruling class but seem to be popularly interpreted among the common people or officials in their daily life. The example also shows that there happened to have different or even opposite views towards the same sign. There are other narrations in Táng notes to show the subjective misinterpretation of a sign since misfortune instead of prosperity befalls. For example, *ZhūGōng Jiù Shì* (渚宫旧事) mentioned that, during the regime of Sòng Wéndì (宋文帝) in the Southern Dynasties (420-589), Guō Zhòngchǎn (郭仲产), an official serving Liú Yìxuān (刘义宣) who was by that time the provincial king of Nánjùn (南郡), had planted bamboos in his courtyard. The extraordinary long branches and flourishing leaves made the bamboos look like a wood. Guō thought it was an auspicious sign but he was soon put to death as a party to the conspiracy of Liú Yìxuān.

(b) Snow falls in lunar March

*Dà Táng Xīn Yǔ* (大唐新语) stated that, during the regime of Wǔ Zétiān (武则天), there happened a snowfall in March. The court officials treated the snowfall as an auspicious sign and therefore drafted a memorial to the throne for celebration. Yet an official named Wáng Qiúlǐ (王求礼) stopped them and opined that the snowfall in March, just like a thunder in December, should rather denote a calamity caused by the improper management of the Prime Minister. The court appreciated Wáng's opinion and cancelled their act for celebration.

Extraordinary natural phenomena, if interpreted as auspicious signs, are classified to be the greatest auspiciousness in Táng. As the emperors were happy to know about the occurrence of auspicious signs, it had been a very popular practice for the officials as well as all other people to report the auspicious signs which they defined to the throne as many as possible to gain the emperors' fondness and rewards. Example (b), which aimed at praising the upright character of Wáng Qiúlǐ, recorded a seldom case that Wang's opinions were accepted by his colleagues. In fact, those who negated auspicious signs had to take a serious risk in incurring the displeasure of the emperor or ruling authority. As recorded also in *Dà Táng Xīn Yǔ*, for instance, there were frequently various weird happenings or objects interpreted to be auspicious during the time when Wǔ Zétiān dominated the court after the death of Emperor Gāozōng (高宗). A provincial official offered an auspicious stone to Wǔ Zétiān. Féng Yuáncháng (冯元常), who was a man of integrity and a capable official, opined his criticism on the inappropriateness of the auspicious sayings in the court. Wǔ Zétiān was very unhappy. Féng was then banished to a minor post in an outlying province and put to death later.

(c) Three-legged crow

*Yǒuyáng Zá Zǔ* (酉阳杂俎) mentioned that there was a tribute of a three-legged crow

to the throne during the time Wǔ Zétiān controlled the court. There were doubts about the genuineness of the three legs. Wǔ responded in smiling that it should be completely fine to follow what the historical documents had written and there was no need to prove the authenticity. She regarded the crow to be of great auspiciousness as recorded in the Zhōu Dynasty (1046 BC-256 BC). But it is interesting to note that she was unpleasant when even Emperor Ruizōng (睿宗) said that the front leg of the crow was a fake and then the third leg fell onto the ground just a moment afterwards.

The belief in three-legged crow or three-legged golden crow has been closely related to the Chinese ancient myth saying that the crow is an incarnation of the Sun. One of the most famous examples (Figure 1) indicating such a belief is the T-shaped silk painting unearthed in the Mǎwángduī (马王堆) tomb of the Western Hàn Dynasty (202 BC-8 BC). The adding of one more leg to the golden crow has been remarkable since Western Hàn. The image of a three-legged crow, which has then been placed nearby Queen Mother of the West (西王母), has further been associated with immortality. Examples can be found in the figure bricks of the Hàn Dynasty (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Crow as an incarnation of the Sun (top right corner)



Figure 2: Three-legged crow (lower left)

Wǔ Zétiān's complete acceptance to auspicious objects actually comes with her intentional usage and the political culture of auspicious sign. When the throne is going to be seized, the usurper will make use of a mass of auspicious signs which appear everywhere to make people believe in the indication, recognition and even order from

Heaven to the usurper and shifting of regime. It can be found in historical documents that there had been extraordinary quantities and various types of auspicious signs during the period Wǔ Zétiān got the political power. She just followed the way that other usurpers had adopted in the previous dynasties, like Wáng Mǎng (王莽) by the end of Western Hàn, and claimed to take the throne under divine commandment.

(d) White magpies nesting

*Yōuyáng Zá Zǔ* mentioned that, during the regime of Emperor Tàizōng (太宗), there suddenly came the white magpies nesting in a tree grown in the front place of the palace that the emperor slept in. The court officials got excited and voiced their celebration. But Tàizōng responded that he had laughed at the fondness in auspicious sign of Yángdì (炀帝) of the Suí Dynasty (581-618), and the happening was not worthy to be celebrated since auspiciousness should lie in getting able and virtuous persons. He then ordered to ruin the nest and let the magpies fly away in the countryside.

The three-legged crow and magpie are birds which have been classified as the middle level auspiciousness in Táng. There is a difference between the interpretations of the two birds. Generally in and before the Táng Dynasty, the crow, particularly the three-legged crow which has been worshipped for its mythos, spiritual power and rarity, has been interpreted to be auspicious. The appearance of crow, like dragon, tiger, phoenix, tortoise, can be said to be the sign of greatest auspiciousness. But afterwards, more and more people have changed their views towards crows due to some reasons including their negative impressions on the crow's hoarse twittering and the black color associated with inauspicious cultural meaning. On the contrary, the sweet chirp of a magpie, though may be subjective, has been much welcomed and commonly regarded to announce and bring happiness to people. In Táng, there has already been a popular folk adage, as recorded in *Yōuyáng Zá Zǔ*, saying that "Chancing on a magpie nesting brings prominence (见鹊上梁必贵)".

It is not a common case that the emperors, like Tàizōng, have seemed to show not much concern about the auspicious sign. But there are other examples as recorded in the Táng miscellaneous notes. According to *Dùyáng Zá Biān* (杜阳杂编), Emperor Dézōng (德宗) received a tribute which was an auspicious whip with exquisite decorations of the shapes and patterns of Chinese unicorn, phoenix, tortoise and dragon as well as amber in color flashing while waving in the dark. It was said that he took the whip in wonderment though he had not been fond of precious things and auspicious sign.

Some emperors like Tàizōng and Dézōng are not fond of auspicious sign, but it does not mean that the sayings on auspicious sign are forbidden by them. In fact, throughout the Táng Dynasty, there are laws punishing those who do not report the auspicious signs to the court once they know. There is also an office entitled huángmén shiláng (黄门侍郎) with dedicated duties to handle sacrificial affairs and to deal with the collection, record, report and interpretation of the auspicious signs. The intellectuals, like Dǒng Zhòngshū in the Hàn Dynasty, have tried to make use of the auspicious signs with providence to strengthen the power of the throne and to exhort the emperors in their rulings. The recorded saying of Tàizōng that the greatest auspicious sign should be people's happiness resulted from the implementation of



benevolence policy should be an indirect expression reflecting the ultimate goal of the Confucians and their culture.

(e) Fox in people's house

As stated in *Xuān Shì Zhì*, during the regime of Emperor Sùzōng (肅宗), Lǐ Kuí (李揆), a court official, saw a white fox in the courtyard of his house. He ordered the servants to chase the fox but it disappeared. He told a guest about this. The guest interpreted that the appearance of the white fox was an auspicious sign and he dared to make a celebration. The next day Lǐ was granted a promotion.

Fox has already been regarded as an animal with supernatural power before Táng period. Always in companion with the three-legged crow as shown, for examples, in the figure bricks and stones of the Hàn Dynasty, the fox with nine tails has also been associated with Queen Mother of the West and immortal (Figure 3 and 4).



Figure 3: Fox with nine tails (upper right) Figure 4: Fox with nine tails (left)

Fox, as recorded in Táng miscellaneous notes, has been given more complicated images and cultural meanings. On one hand, fox has appeared to be suspicious, seductive, bad and vile, and to be able to befog people's mind and make them fall ill. On the other hand, fox has positive images including its unswerving loyalty, lovingness to lover and children, repaying obligations, erudition, and eloquence. Its supernatural power includes the transformation (to humans, immortals and even Bodhisattva, etc.), precognition of good or ill fate, capability to guess correctly the notions of people, and ability to know about the nether world and human world and to get in touch with Heaven. It is believed by the Táng people that fox in its original form or transformed human form always goes to their homes, lives with them, and even gets married with humans and produces young. There have been opposite but mixed attitudes towards fox. One is to serve and offer sacrifices to fox as a celestial being, hoping that they can get favors or benefits in return. As stated in *Cháoyě Qiān Zài* (朝野僉載), there has been a folk adage “No village if no fox spirit (无狐魅, 不成村)” in early Táng, telling the popularity of the worship of fox. But the opposite attitude to treat fox as a globin can also be founded in Táng notes. There are records mentioning about how the people have averted, expelled and killed the fox due to their belief in not getting to be harmed by the fox.

Therefore it is not strange to note that there can be opposite views or interpretations towards the same object at the same time. The appearance of fox can be an ominous sign, for example a fox under the bed, seeing a shining black fox, or dozens of wild foxes propping up their rice jars and passing over the top of the walls. On the contrary, fox can be related to an auspicious sign, for example seeing a white fox, or a fox's

cave is found. It is further interesting to note that colors which have been embodied with plentiful cultural meanings may be associated with the concepts of ominousness and auspiciousness. The color “black” denotes fear and misfortune as one of the popular cultural meanings while “white” gives the Chinese people an impression of fortune, preciousness and rarity. Some believe that the same cultural meaning imposed on animals like white deer and white tiger have had a very long history. “White fish springing into the boat (白鱼入舟)” has been used in the ancient document to denote the fortune and victory of Wǔwáng of Zhōu (周武王) who was on his way to fight against Zhòuwáng (纣王) of the Shāng Dynasty (~1600 BC-~1046 BC). The cultural concepts, like the ominousness of black crow and black fox as well as the auspiciousness of white magpie and white fox, have developed and been merged into the traditional folk culture.

## **Conclusion**

The belief in auspicious sign derives basically from the psychology of people in pursuing fortune, luck or prosperity. The signs have been identified to be particular objects and phenomena that are commonly welcomed to be auspicious by certain people in certain time. But, as mentioned in Táng miscellaneous notes, there are different or even opposite interpretations towards a number of signs on their auspiciousness or ominousness, for example the pear trees blossom in winter, and a snow falls in lunar March. There may also be a change of the interpretation of certain signs. For instance, the crow and the fox have been treated as auspicious signs in the Táng Dynasty, but they are commonly interpreted to be ominousness or of negative images nowadays.

The auspicious sign has been intentionally advocated and used by the ruling class to admire the emperors and to strengthen the imperial authority. During the period that the throne is planned to be seized, the usurper will more frequently make use of a mass of auspicious signs to gain people’s belief in the providence given to the new ruling class. Wǔ Zétiān, as mentioned in Táng notes, is an obvious example.

The use of auspicious sign in feudal dynasties has developed typically into a political culture. It has also shown the thought and objective of certain intellectuals such as Dǒng Zhòngshū who have tried to utilize their belief in the correspondence between Heaven and mankind as well as the unity of nature and man to make the emperor implement benevolent policy. The saying of Tàizōng in response to the white magpies nesting, as recorded in Táng notes, is actually embodied with the thought in implementing policy of benevolence as advocated in the Confucian culture. The cultural meanings and functions of auspicious sign are complex. Not only mythological beliefs or philosophical thoughts like Confucianism and Daoism have been involved in the propitious interpretations but also a symbolic association with the recognition or appreciation on the governor’s performance from Heaven to consolidate the regime has been made all through the dynasties.

It seems that, as the feudal dynasties no longer exist, the advocacy and use of auspicious sign to admire the emperors and to strengthen the imperial authority have faded away accordingly. In the modern society, the auspicious sign may probably be regarded to be a kind of superstition since many of the legendary animals (like dragon and the Chinese unicorn) and abnormal phenomena, as believed to be spiritual or

supernatural by people in ancient times, may not really exist or can be explained from the scientific point of view. But the psychology of people in their fondness and seeking of prosperity and luck will not change. Moreover, the wonders of nature, apart from the arguments on the existence of Heaven or god(s), can still not be explained in full scientifically. As a matter of fact, no matter it is a superstitious belief or not, the auspicious sign, like the belief in magpies bringing happiness and fortune, has developed and merged into the traditional folk culture of the Chinese people. Parts of the auspicious signs still remain and are accepted by people nowadays. The numerous auspicious images and expressions prevailing in the documentation, unearthed relics, literary works, art pieces, daily utensils, etc. can be taken as a reflection as well as an outcome of the long-lasting auspicious culture.



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