



A Brief Discussion on the Culture of Auspicious Symbols in Ancient China

Shixue Gong*

¹School of Literature, Nanyang Normal University, Nanyang, 473061, China

* Corresponding Author: m13037681178@163.com

Project Funding: The research is supported by Innovation Team for Philosophy and Social Sciences in Higher Education Institutions in Henan Province: A Comprehensive Study of Culture and Literature in Han Dynasty (Project No. 2024-CXTD-15); Key Project for the Inheritance and Development of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture in Henan Province's Universities: Research on Chinese Auspicious Culture (Project No. 2023-WHZX-34).

Citation: Shixue Gong (2025). A Brief Discussion on the Culture of Auspicious Symbols in Ancient China. *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry*, 25(3), 615-623.

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 11 February 2025

Accepted: 13 March 2025

ABSTRACT

Auspicious symbols, also known as "auspicious omens," "divine responses," "good omens," "auspicious signs," or "favorable omens," are ancient signs and portents indicating that an emperor is fulfilling the heavenly mandate and governing with virtue. Auspicious symbol culture is a political and cultural system that blends concepts of the Mandate of Heaven from pre-Qin times, beliefs in omens, thoughts on virtuous governance, and imperial statecraft. It employs "divine teachings" to consolidate rule and embellish peace. This culture emerged during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, and the formation of new concepts of heavenly principles during this period was a key factor in its development. Totem worship, belief in omens, and the culture of historical officers were important contributing factors to its formation. After its emergence, auspicious symbol culture went through several major stages: the early development in the pre-Qin period, prosperity during the Qin and Han dynasties, transformation during the Wei and Jin periods, integration during the Six Dynasties, revival during the Tang and Song dynasties, and decline during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. It had a profound influence on many aspects of ancient Chinese politics, religion, rites, literature, and more.

Keywords:

1.EXPRESSION PARADIGM OF AUSPICIOUS SYMBOL CULTURE

Overall, auspicious symbol culture has three basic expression paradigms:

Firstly, when the emperor possesses virtue, the heavenly mandate and auspicious symbols manifest. For example: "The heart-bird symbolizes that the ruler's virtue reaches distant lands, and the union of the four barbarians occurs." [Shen Yue, Song Shu, Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 865.] "When the ruler has the beginnings of supreme virtue, the five stars align like a string of pearls." [Qu Tanxida, Kaiyuan Zhanjing, Yuelu Press, 1994, p. 215.]

Secondly, when the heavenly mandate and auspicious symbols appear, they signify the emperor's virtue. For example: "In the second year of Emperor Zhang's Yuanhe reign, the imperial edict states: 'Recently, the Phoenix, Yellow Dragon, and Luann bird have appeared together in seven prefectures, and in some cases, in a single prefecture multiple times, along with sightings of the White Crow, Divine Sparrow, and frequent appearances of sweet dew.'" [Fan Ye, Hou Han Shu, Zhonghua Book Company, 1965, p. 152.]

Thirdly, when the heavenly mandate and auspicious symbols appear, they indicate that the emperor will undoubtedly become the true ruler. For example: "When Emperor Guangwu was about to be born, a red light filled the room, brightening the entire space, and his father saw this as an omen. ... That year, a rare ear of grain appeared with one stalk and nine ears, unlike ordinary crops." [Shen Yue, Song Shu, Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 769.]

Among these three expression paradigms of auspicious symbols, the first and second types directly represent the manifestation of virtuous governance and the display of virtue through auspicious signs. These occur after the ruler has assumed the heavenly mandate, and their function is to praise good governance and recount virtuous deeds. The third type represents a

political prophecy of a ruler possessing virtue and the mandate of heaven. This occurs during times of power struggle, and its function is to highlight the divine mandate and promote the belief in the ruler's heavenly right to govern.

2. ESSENTIAL ATTRIBUTES OF AUSPICIOUS SYMBOL CULTURE

The culture of omens and auspicious signs, fundamentally, represents a form of political prophecy centered on auspicious symbolism. It served as the foundation for constructing a belief system of "divinely granted kingship." First, the heavens (or celestial deities) were perceived as the ultimate authority, governing all events. Whether a claimant to power could ascend the throne depended on the will of the heavens. Similarly, the moral virtue of a ruler and the prosperity of their governance were deemed subject to divine evaluation. Second, as celestial deities do not speak, their intentions were conveyed through extraordinary signs and omens, known as *fu rui*. These omens could manifest as unusual astronomical phenomena, such as the alignment of five planets (Jupiter, Saturn, Mercury, Mars, and Venus) in the same direction or the appearance of multicolored clouds. Rare animals and plants, such as white crows, white tigers, nine-eared grains, or intertwined trees, also served as omens. Finally, *fu rui* acted as a bridge connecting celestial deities with the emperor. For an aspiring ruler, the appearance of such signs signified their destined ascension to the throne, rallying public support and facilitating their claim to power. For an incumbent ruler, these omens affirmed their virtue and the peace and prosperity of their reign, serving as auspicious indicators.

In essence, auspicious symbols (*fu rui*) are auspicious omens signifying that the ruler is carrying out the heavenly mandate and governing with virtue. As symbols of good fortune, auspicious symbols possess the following attributes:

2.1 Uniqueness

A review of auspicious objects reveals that they are characterized by their rarity and extraordinary nature. For instance, in the category of animal omens, there is a significant number of white animals, such as the white pheasant, white crow, white dove, white sparrow, white magpie, white falcon, white swallow, white crane, white goose, white unicorn, white tiger, white fox, white wolf, white deer, white roe, white rabbit, white mouse, white dragon, white serpent, white *chi* (a mythical beast), white turtle, white fish, and others. These white animals, either rare species or albino individuals, are seldom seen and therefore regarded as rare and precious. Since white symbolizes purity and longevity, the rarity of albino animals naturally attracted attention and elevated them to the status of auspicious omens. [Liu Zhao, "A New Interpretation of the 'Xiaocheng Wall Inscription': The Earliest Record of Auspicious Symbols in Chinese History," *Fudan Journal*, Issue 1, 2009.]

In terms of plant omens, examples include auspicious grains (*jiahe*) with one stalk bearing multiple ears, twin trees growing together (*lianli*), or the mythical plant *moluo*, which grows one pod each day for 15 days and then sheds one pod each day after that. [Chen Li, *Annotations and Explanations of the Baihutong*, Zhonghua Book Company, 1994, p. 286.] These phenomena, either natural mutations, grafting results, or mythological tales, are highly unusual.

As for mineral omens, such as golden treasures, gold itself may not inherently be considered auspicious, but its extraordinary appearance is marked as an omen: "Gold emerges in strange and unusual forms." [Hou Hanshu, Volume 2, "Ming Emperor's Annals," Zhonghua Book Company, 1965, p. 114.] Other examples include natural phenomena such as solar and lunar conjunctions, the alignment of five planets, or clear rivers, all of which represent rare occurrences in the natural world.

Ancient scholars recognized this attribute of uniqueness in auspicious symbols. Wang Chong noted in *Lunheng* that "auspicious objects arise from harmonious energy; they are born within ordinary categories but exhibit extraordinary qualities, making them auspicious." [Huang Hui, *Annotations of the Lunheng*, Zhonghua Book Company, 1990, p. 730.] Ma Duanlin also observed: "Things that deviate from the norm are extraordinary; thus, auspicious signs include phoenixes, unicorns, sweet dew, and auspicious clouds—all rare and seldom seen phenomena." [Ma Duanlin, *Wenxian Tongkao*, Zhonghua Book Company, 1986, p. 9.] Hence, uniqueness is a fundamental characteristic of auspicious symbols.

2.2 Auspiciousness

The intrinsic meaning of *fu rui* lies in being auspicious omens. They signify virtuous governance, herald the acceptance of the heavenly mandate, and predict peace and prosperity. Their auspicious nature is evident and widely recognized. For example, the *Shangshu Zhengyi* cites Wang Bi and Han Kangbo: "Auspicious omens confirm and praise virtuous deeds." [Shangshu Zhengyi, in Ruan Yuan's *Annotations on the Thirteen Classics*, Zhonghua Book Company, 1980, p. 192.] Pei Yin's *Shiji Ji Jie* also quotes Zheng Xuan: "Heaven grants you this beautiful response, which is known as an auspicious symbol." [Sima Qian, *Shiji*, Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 80.] This "confirmation of virtue" and "beautiful response" reflects the essential auspicious nature of *fu rui*.

The inherent auspiciousness of auspicious symbols also explains their transformation into cultural symbols of good fortune as *fu rui* culture declined. Symbols like twin trees (*lianli*), birds of shared wings (*biyinia*), fish with connected eyes (*bimuyu*), dragons, and phoenixes originally had clear political implications but later became popularized as emblems of good fortune in folklore. This transformation illustrates the underlying auspicious essence of *fu rui*.

Clearly, *fu rui* culture and auspicious culture are interconnected yet have notable distinctions. *Fu rui* culture is a form of political omen culture with auspicious attributes, but its focus is limited to matters of imperial authority and the legitimacy of rulers. For commoners to falsely claim *fu rui* was considered an act of usurpation. As *fu rui* culture declined, this exclusivity gradually diminished. In contrast, auspicious culture represents a cultural phenomenon centered on the invocation and blessing of good fortune. It reflects the materialization of humanity's psychological inclination toward seeking luck and blessings, as seen in auspicious characters, symbols, and imagery. Auspicious culture encompasses beliefs in good fortune and their material expressions across all domains of human activity.

2.3 Inevitability of Manifestation

The third essential attribute of fu rui is the inevitability of their manifestation. According to the Liji Zhongyong: "When a state is about to rise, there will inevitably be auspicious signs; when it is about to fall, there will inevitably be omens of calamity. These signs are reflected in divination and manifest in physical forms. Approaching fortune or misfortune can be foreseen, as absolute sincerity is akin to divinity." [Liji Zhengyi, in Ruan Yuan's Annotations on the Thirteen Classics, Zhonghua Book Company, 1980, p. 1251.] The Lüshi Chunqiu also notes: "When an emperor is about to emerge, Heaven first shows omens to the common people." [Xu Weiyu, Annotations on the Lüshi Chunqiu, Zhonghua Book Company, 2009, p. 284.]

Dong Zhongshu stated: "When Heaven grants great authority to a ruler, there will always be something beyond human capability to serve as a sign—this is the symbol of the mandate." [Ban Gu, Hanshu, Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 2500.] The concept of fu rui is deeply rooted in the theory of cosmic resonance between Heaven and humans, positing that virtue inevitably brings forth auspicious signs. The arrival of these signs verifies the ruler's virtue and the heavenly mandate.

As Ban Gu noted: "Heaven expresses its mandate through fu rui, revealing the virtue of the ruler without need for words." [Hanshu, Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 2608.] Thus, fu rui acts as a link between the divine mandate and the ruler, reducing the mystique of Heaven while enhancing its authority. This connection gives tangible evidence to the relationship between Heaven and humanity, creating a framework of visible signs and identifiable patterns.

3.AUSPICIOUS SYMBOL CULTURE AND POLITICS

Auspicious symbol (fu rui) culture is fundamentally a political culture, with its primary function being political utility.

3.1 The Political Constructive Function

Auspicious symbol culture serves as a powerful legitimizing tool for royal authority by providing a divine mandate. In ancient Chinese society, the prevailing belief was that the rise and fall of royal power were dictated by the will of Heaven, and all changes in governance were rooted in this divine order. However, as Liu Xie observed, "The divine way elucidates the hidden; the mandate of Heaven subtly reveals itself" (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons, Zhonghua Book Company, 2000, p. 40). The mandate of Heaven often required the manifestation of auspicious phenomena to make it tangible. Thus, auspicious symbols played a critical role in signaling the heavenly mandate and showcasing the ruler's virtue.

Shen Yue remarked, "When the dragon ascends to the ninth heaven, it corresponds to the light of Heaven, signifying the symbol of receiving the divine mandate and the resonance between Heaven and humanity" (Book of Song, Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 759).

3.2 The Political Evaluative Function

Auspicious symbol culture also served as a means of political assessment. Dong Zhongshu stated, "Supreme virtue receives the mandate" (Chunqiu Fanlu, Zhonghua Book Company, 1992, p. 271), while Ban Gu wrote, "Auspicious omens appear in response to sincerity and are the result of accumulated good deeds and virtue" (Hanshu, Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 2500). This concept—that the manifestation of auspicious omens inherently reveals the ruler's virtue—links virtue, virtuous governance, and moral leadership directly to the ruler.

Auspicious symbols were not only interpreted as signs of the ruler's divine mandate but also as celestial rewards for their abundant virtue. In this way, auspicious symbol culture constructed the theoretical foundation for the legitimacy of ancient Chinese monarchic rule, seamlessly integrating divine will, omens, royal authority, and virtue. Simultaneously, it established a system for self-affirmation, self-promotion, and self-glorification among the ruling class, offering a rich ideological resource for extolling the ruler's achievements and fabricating an image of peace and prosperity. This glorification of virtues and embellishment of peace, in turn, reinforced the cohesion and centripetal force of royal politics, consolidating its authority.

3.3 The Political Regulatory Function

Auspicious symbols also facilitated political adjustment. Their appearance often prompted rulers to modify governance strategies. For instance:

- Changing the Era Name: Emperor Wu of Han changed the era names to "Yuanshou" and "Baoding" after the discovery of a white unicorn and the treasured tripod.
- Establishing Shrines and Offering Sacrifices: Duke Xian of Qin established altars and conducted sacrifices in response to golden rain in Liyang, interpreting it as a golden omen.
- Rewarding Officials and Granting Pardons: Emperor Xuan of Han, upon the appearance of auspicious symbols, would often bestow gifts upon his ministers and issue general amnesties to garner public support.

These measures eased class tensions, strengthened cohesion within the ruling class, and created a unique internal mechanism of self-regulation, self-repair, and self-improvement.

In summary, auspicious symbol culture, centered around the political objectives of divine kingship, the heavenly mandate, and virtuous governance, was deeply intertwined with the political operations of ancient Chinese dynasties.

4.Auspicious Symbol Culture and Religion

Auspicious symbol (fu rui) culture forms an integral part of ancient Chinese religious culture or religious consciousness. It reinforces the political notion of divine kingship, promotes the ethical teachings of "spiritual governance," exerts significant moral influence, and fulfills the religious functions of encouraging virtue and deterring vice.

With the rise of apocryphal texts (chen wei) and theology, the moral dimension of auspicious symbol culture became increasingly prominent and pervasive. It extended beyond the virtue of rulers to encompass moral and ethical norms across all aspects of social life. For example:

- The Xiaojing Zuoqi states, "When filial piety and brotherly respect reach their peak, they resonate with divine spirits, and the phoenix will nest" (Collected Apocrypha, Hebei People's Press, 1994, p. 998).

- The Rui Ying Tu notes, "When the ruler is benevolent and righteous, the purple emanation will appear" (Ji Rui, reprinted in Congshu Jicheng, vol. 702, Commercial Press, 1936).

- The Zhonghou Wuhe Ji states, "When the ruler establishes rituals and music in alignment with Heaven's will, the bright star will appear" (Collected Apocrypha, Hebei People's Press, 1994, p. 510).

These texts integrate virtues such as filial piety, benevolence, righteousness, and ritual propriety into the framework of auspicious phenomena. Observing moral standards was believed to bring about auspicious omens, while violations would result in disasters. This belief is rooted in the cosmological principle of correspondence between Heaven and humanity (tian ren gan ying), which posits that moral conduct elicits corresponding heavenly responses. Essentially, it reflects the doctrine of "retribution for good and evil," building upon and elevating traditional ideas such as "A family that accumulates virtue will enjoy lasting blessings, while one that accumulates vice will suffer enduring calamities."

As Qing Xitai noted, "The theory of the correspondence between Heaven and humanity and the doctrine of retribution for good and evil are core elements of religious thought. They provided the philosophical foundation for the emergence of new religions in society" (History of Chinese Taoism, Sichuan People's Press, 1996, p. 30).

It is therefore unsurprising that the religious transformation of Confucianism, the emergence of Taoism, and the introduction of Buddhism all occurred during the Han dynasty, when auspicious symbol thought was widespread. In subsequent periods, such as the Wei, Jin, Six Dynasties, Sui, and Tang eras, both Buddhism and Taoism were deeply influenced by auspicious symbol culture. This led to significant interaction and mutual influence between the two religions.

Prominent figures such as the Taoist masters Tao Hongjing and Kou Qianzhi, as well as the Buddhist monks Tanwuchen and Shi Xuanchang, were well-versed in apocryphal texts. They often advocated for or even fabricated auspicious omens to achieve various goals:

- To elevate their own sanctity and enhance the divine nature of their religion, thereby garnering popular belief.

- To align themselves with imperial authority, thereby gaining political support and utilizing their religion to "aid governance and assist royal transformation."

These strategies significantly contributed to the development and expansion of both Buddhism and Taoism.

The Taoist priest Tao Hongjing, known as the "Prime Minister of the Mountains," founded the Maoshan School. According to the Book of Liang, it is recorded that Tao Hongjing's miraculous birth was marked by an auspicious omen: "At first, his mother dreamed that a green dragon emerged from her womb, and two heavenly beings, holding incense burners, came to her. Later, she became pregnant and gave birth to Hongjing." Tao Hongjing's birth, much like those of ancient emperors, was mythologized by Taoists to elevate their leader's status. Similarly, the Taoist priest Kou Qianzhi of the new Heavenly Master Sect encouraged his followers to forge auspicious signs—"Stone Inscriptions of the Fu"—and present them to Emperor Taiwu of the Northern Wei. The emperor was delighted and changed the era name to "Taiping Zhenjun," offering strong support to Taoism, which led to the sect's significant development. In another example, the monk Tan Wucheng used secret mantras to make a dry stone spring forth with water. He then claimed that the emperor's virtuous rule had moved the celestial deities, prompting them to send down the miraculous "spring from the dry stone." This act praised the emperor's great virtue and naturally earned him the emperor's favor, paving the way for the spread of his teachings. Monk Xuanchang, upon establishing a temple named "Qixing," also extolled the "mountain's miraculous signs" as auspicious omens of the Qi emperor's rule. Clearly, this was a political maneuver to align with the ruling power, aiming to gain the support of the emerging regime and thereby promote the growth of Buddhism. These examples all reflect the interaction between fu rui culture and religion, highlighting the political and religious dynamics at play.

5.AUSPICIOUS SYMBOL CULTURE AND RITES

Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty, Yang Jian, stated: "The ruler receives the mandate of Heaven, and the changes of fortune follow accordingly. If there are rites, auspicious symbols will surely descend; if there are no rites, calamities and anomalies will arise. To govern the country and establish oneself, rites are indispensable." (Sui Shu, Wei Zheng and Linghu Defen, Zhonghua Book Company, 1973, p. 1278).

Rites, as the "order of Heaven and Earth," were essential behavioral norms and moral guidelines in ancient political and social life. Auspicious symbols (fu rui) are signs of good fortune sent by Heaven, embodying the response between Heaven and humanity. When auspicious omens appear, the ruler must humbly accept the mandate of Heaven and follow specific rituals as a form of gratitude. Therefore, as Yuan Hong wrote, "When auspicious symbols manifest, the ruler should respond to the divine and honor the supreme deity" (Hou Han Ji Xiu Zhu, Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, 1987, p. 60). This reasoning underpinned the rulers' promotion of divine kingship and auspicious symbol thought throughout history.

Whenever extraordinary omens were seen and identified as auspicious symbols, various forms of sacrifices and rituals were held, varying in scale and form. Over time, these rituals formed a set ceremonial system. For instance, during the reign of King Cheng of Zhou, when the auspicious signs of the "phoenix" and "mengjia" (a rare plant) appeared, the Duke of Zhou and King Cheng performed rituals at the He and Luo Rivers (Song Shu, Shen Yue, Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 765). During the reign of Emperor Wen of the Han, after the appearance of a yellow dragon, Emperor Wen offered sacrifices at the five altars (Shiji, Sima Qian, Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 1381-1382). Emperor Wu of Han, upon the sighting of the one-horned beast, conducted a ritual with offerings (Shiji, Sima Qian, Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 457-458). During the Three Kingdoms period, Sun Quan, the ruler of Wu, frequently received auspicious signs and performed sacrificial rituals to honor the divine (Sanguozhi, Chen Shou, Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 1135-1136). These examples are just a few among many.

Moreover, when multiple auspicious signs appeared simultaneously, they would be reported as a successful omen, leading to the ceremonial ritual of fengshan (sealing and offering sacrifices at Mount Tai). The Shangshu Zhonghou states: "Since ancient times, when emperors achieved success and their path was clear, auspicious symbols appeared, and they would then seal and offer sacrifices at Mount Tai" (Collected Apocrypha, An Juxiang and Nakamura Shohachi, Hebei People's Press, 1994, p. 419).

Fengshan was a grand ritual where emperors made offerings to Heaven and reported their successes. Both the culture of auspicious symbols and the ritual of fengshan were closely linked to the emperor. One represented the divine approval, and the other was a grand ceremony of thanksgiving, thus perfectly aligning: On one hand, the manifestation of auspicious symbols prompted the proposal for fengshan, which eventually led to its execution; on the other hand, the execution of the fengshan ritual required the manifestation of auspicious symbols as a basis for the heavenly mandate. Thus, auspicious symbols became a critical condition for the performance of sacrificial rites, especially the fengshan ceremony.

6. AUSPICIOUS SYMBOL CULTURE AND LITERATURE

Liu Xie, in Wenxin Diaolong ("The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons"), said: "The symbols of white fish and red birds, the auspicious signs of yellow silver and purple jade, are magnificent and extraordinary in nature, rich in expression and fertile in language. While they may not benefit classical texts, they assist literary works." (Wenxin Diaolong, Zhou Zhenfu, 1986, p. 37). The fact that auspicious symbol culture contributes to literature is indisputable. During the period when auspicious symbol culture was popular, the use of "auspicious signs" in literary creation was a very common phenomenon. "Using auspicious signs" refers to the practice of referencing auspicious symbols or directly making them the subject of literary works. This is an important form of the relationship between literature and auspicious symbol culture. The use of auspicious symbols in literature often carries a political purpose of praising current governance and embellishing peace.

The widespread use of auspicious symbols in literature not only reflects the popularity of auspicious symbol culture during this period but also shows that literary texts, with their themes of praise, aligned well with the function of auspicious symbols as a means of glorifying virtue.

For example, in poetry, "using auspicious symbols" mainly appears in political poems that extol contemporary governance. Looking at the Pre-Qin, Han, Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties Poetry collection, it includes 347 pieces of Jiao Miao Ge Ci (temple and sacrifice songs), 126 pieces of Yan She Ge Ci (military victory songs), 85 pieces of Wu Qu Ge Ci (dance songs), and 71 pieces of Gu Chui Qu Ci (battle drum songs). Among these, 92, 40, 20, and 28 respectively are poems that make use of auspicious symbols. In the case of Fu (rhapsody), the Quan Han Fu contains 305 pieces of rhapsody works from 87 authors, with 41 of them directly referring to auspicious symbols. The Quan Tang Wen (Complete Works of Tang Literature), including works by Lu Xinyuan, contains 950 pieces of Tang Dynasty rhapsody, of which 118 directly deal with auspicious symbols. This does not include many other rhapsody works that are related to auspicious symbols.

In terms of song (hymns), according to the Qing scholar Yan Kejun's Quan Shanggu San Dai Qin Han San Guo Liu Chao Wen (Complete Ancient Literature from the Three Dynasties to the Six Dynasties), from the Han to Sui dynasties, 197 hymn works remain, with 36 hymns directly dealing with auspicious symbols and 40 related to them, making a total of 76. This demonstrates that the expression of auspicious symbol culture can be found across major Chinese literary genres such as poetry, rhapsody, and hymn. The use of auspicious symbols to praise virtue became a dominant trend in ancient Chinese political literature.

In literary creation, when the focus shifts towards politics, serving the monarchy, and praising imperial virtue, the inherent function of auspicious symbols to glorify governance is activated. This became a customary practice over time, and the combination of auspicious symbols and literature repeatedly emerged in historical contexts. Thus, auspicious symbol culture inevitably found its place in the halls of Chinese literature, marking an important aspect of its relationship with literary creation.

7. Fu Rui Culture and Mythical Legends

8Fu rui culture has had a profound influence on China's ancient myths and legends. Within the system of Chinese ancient history, the myth of divine conception and the associated legends are often referred to by historians as "divine conception and fu rui." The historian Shen Yue recorded the myths and fu rui legends of emperors in great detail.

Divine conception and fu rui frequently appear in historical records, becoming an essential component of the "mandate of heaven" theory of imperial rule. For example, among numerous emperors, there are those born through divine conception: the Yan Emperor, born from his mother's union with a divine dragon; the Yellow Emperor, born from his mother's union with a flash of lightning; the Emperor Zhuangxu, born from his mother's union with a rainbow; Emperor Yao, born from his mother's union

with a red dragon; Liu Bang, born from his mother's union with a flood dragon; and Wu Zetian, born from her mother's union with a black dragon.

There are also emperors who were born with unusual physical features or under extraordinary celestial omens. For instance, the Yan Emperor had a bull's head, the Yellow Emperor had a dragon-like face, Emperor Ku had prominent teeth, and Emperor Shun had a double pupil. The Duke of Zhou had the face of a dragon and the shoulders of a tiger, was ten feet tall, and had four breasts. The founding emperor of the Han Dynasty, Emperor Gaozu, had a majestic countenance, a dragon-like face, a beautiful beard, and seventy-two black marks on his left thigh. Furthermore, there were auspicious signs such as the appearance of red light and the growth of auspicious grain during the birth of Emperor Guangwu, and sweet dew falling on a tree near the tomb of Liu Song's founder.

These emperors, either born through divine conception or with unusual appearances at birth, or accompanied by celestial signs, are part of three types of "mandate" myths and legends. These "mandate" myths are essentially political myths with clear ideological construction intentions. Through the theme of the emperor's birth, the "mandate of heaven" myth intervenes in the historical narrative of royal power through the three methods of divine conception, unusual physical traits, and extraordinary omens. In this process, the "mandate of heaven" myth, as a grand narrative, enters history by presenting the sacred origins of royal families, and thus becomes a formative element in the construction of the ideology of imperial authority.

8. CONTEMPORARY VALUE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF AUSPICIOUS SYMBOL CULTURE

As a deeply influential cultural phenomenon and tradition, auspicious symbol culture still holds significant value and meaning today.

8.1 Fu rui culture, aesthetics and art

In ancient China, there were specialized books dedicated to recording fu rui, such as Rui Ying Tu (Images of Auspicious Signs), Fu Rui Tu (Images of Fu Signs), and Xiang Rui Tu (Images of Auspicious Omens). These books contained both images and paintings of fu rui as well as explanatory inscriptions. However, these books have mostly been lost over time. The fu rui images we see today primarily come from archaeological discoveries, including Han dynasty mural stones, Han tomb murals, Han dynasty roof tiles, Han cliff inscriptions, and the Dunhuang manuscripts unearthed in modern times. Some of the most representative examples include the Han Mural Stone Carvings from the Wu Liang Shrine in Shandong, Han Tomb Murals from Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, Han Cliff Inscriptions from Tianjing Mountain in Gansu, and the fu rui images in the Dunhuang Rui Ying Tu manuscript (P.2683).

These images feature distinctive elements of Chinese aesthetics, such as symmetry and harmony, fluidity and simplicity, symbolism and allegory, expression and abstraction, boldness and grandeur, as well as ancient and rustic qualities. These aesthetic elements and artistic trends provided material for Chinese artistic techniques and design, becoming an inexhaustible source of inspiration and creativity for artists.

8.2 Fu rui culture and economic development

In ancient China, the appearance of fu rui was regarded as a divine acknowledgment of the emperor's rule. When fu rui signs appeared, emperors would often hold rituals to honor the gods, reduce taxes and corvée labor, and offer material rewards to the people as a way of thanking the deities. These actions, to some extent, stimulated social and economic development.

In modern Chinese society, the political connotations of fu rui culture have been stripped away, and the remaining images and auspicious meanings are widely used in decoration and the development of cultural and creative products. From daily utensils to architectural furniture, from silk, textiles, and clothing to jade, porcelain, stone carvings, as well as film, games, and animation, fu rui culture is present everywhere. The large-scale production, promotion, and application of creative products featuring fu rui as a theme not only satisfy the public's desire to avoid misfortune and seek good fortune but also enrich the cultural connotations of fu rui culture, thereby increasing the economic added value of fu rui products.

In the future, we will further recreate and enhance fu rui cultural resources through the cultural and creative industries based on public consumption psychology and habits, developing high-value-added products that meet societal demands. Only in this way can traditional fu rui culture "preserve" its relevance in contemporary society.

8.3 Auspicious Symbol Culture and the Construction of a Harmonious Society

Auspicious symbols are "the tokens of the mandate, the response between heaven and man," and auspicious symbol culture "awakens the expectations of heaven and man, supports and rewards the emperor's rule." It is a typical embodiment of the ancient Chinese philosophy of the unity of heaven and man. In the context of auspicious symbol culture, if the ruler cultivates a sincere heart, practices virtue, and governs virtuously, harmony prevails, and auspicious signs appear. Dong Zhongshu said: "A ruler must correct his heart to correct the court, correct the court to correct the officials, correct the officials to correct the people, and correct the people to correct the four corners of the world. Thus, with the proper balance of yin and yang, timely rain and wind will arrive, all living things will flourish, and the grains and plants will grow. Heaven and earth will be nourished, and prosperity will abound. The great virtue will be known throughout the land, and all people will come to serve. All blessings will follow, and good fortune will be bestowed." (Han Shu, Ban Gu, 1962, p. 2502-2503). The auspicious symbol culture's mechanism of "beautiful things summon beautiful things" and "similarities move similarly" reflects the subjective efforts of ancient sages to build a harmonious society where rulers, courts, officials, the people, and the four corners of the world coexist harmoniously. This remains of positive significance for the construction of a harmonious society today.

8.4 Auspicious Symbol Culture and Governing the State

Auspicious symbol culture promotes virtue and advocates virtuous governance while limiting the expansion of monarchical power by emphasizing virtue. It demonstrates the ancient sages' subjective efforts to constrain royal power through moral teaching and regulate human affairs through the laws of heaven. This contains democratic spirit and humanistic concern, highlighting the political wisdom and courage of the ancient sages. It remains a valuable reference for the contemporary practice of governing with virtue and ruling with morality.

8.5 Auspicious Symbol Culture and National Cultural Identity

The popularity of auspicious symbols reflects the ancient Chinese people's desire to attract good fortune and avoid misfortune, as well as their habit of praying for blessings and auspicious signs. Over time, while auspicious symbol culture may have become historical, its underlying psychological tendency to seek good fortune and avoid misfortune has been internalized into the collective unconscious of the Chinese nation. It has become a way of thinking, a spiritual force, and a national symbol, demonstrating the cultural psychology and cultural manifestations of the Chinese people's pursuit of good fortune. To this day, symbols of good luck, auspicious customs, and symbols continue to bear the imprint of auspicious symbol culture. Many auspicious symbols and designs are still widely used in architecture, clothing, furniture, and decorations, and many auspicious items, designs, and symbols that showcase national confidence and enhance national identity are beloved by the public. These are vibrant expressions of the continued influence of auspicious symbol culture.

FUNDING:

This work was sponsored in part by Innovation Team for Philosophy and Social Sciences in Higher Education Institutions in Henan Province: A Comprehensive Study of Culture and Literature in Han Dynasty (Project No. 2024-CXTD-15); Key Project for the Inheritance and Development of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture in Henan Province's Universities: Research on Chinese Auspicious Culture (Project No. 2023-WHZZ-34).

REFERENCES

- [1]Shen Yue, Book of Song (Song Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 865.
- [2]Qu Tanxida, Kaiyuan Divination Classic (Kaiyuan Zhanjing), Yuelu Publishing House, 1994, p. 215.
- [3]Fan Ye, Book of the Later Han (Hou Han Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1965, p. 152.
- [4]Shen Yue, Book of Song (Song Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 769.
- [5]Liu Zhao, "A New Interpretation of 'Minor Official Wall Inscriptions' – Revealing the Earliest Auspicious Record in Chinese History," Fudan Journal, 2009, Issue 1.
- [6]Ouyang Xun, Comprehensive Collection of Literary Works (Yiwen Leiju), Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1982, p. 1700.
- [7]Chen Li, White Tiger Passages: Explanation and Evidence (Bai Hu Tong Shu Zheng), Zhonghua Book Company, 1994, p. 286.
- [8]Book of the Later Han (Hou Han Shu), Volume 2, "Emperor Ming's Annals" (Ming Di Ji), recorded: "In the 11th year of Yongping, gold appeared in Chao Lake and was presented to the governor of Lujiang," in Fan Ye, Book of the Later Han, Zhonghua Book Company, 1965, p. 114.
- [9]Huang Hui, On the School of Argumentation: A Critical Edition (Lunheng Kaoshi), Zhonghua Book Company, 1990, p. 839.
- [10]Huang Hui, On the School of Argumentation: A Critical Edition (Lunheng Kaoshi), Zhonghua Book Company, 1990, p. 730.
- [11]Ma Duanlin, Comprehensive Examination of Literature (Wenxian Tongkao), Zhonghua Book Company, 1986, p. 9.
- [12]The Book of Documents: Correct Interpretation (Shang Shu Zhengyi), in Ruan Yuan's edited Thirteen Classics with Commentaries and Explanations (Shisan Jing Zhu Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1980, reprinted edition, p. 192.
- [13]Sima Qian, Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 80.
- [14]See my article "Auspicious Imagery in Classical Chinese Poetry," Zhongzhou Academic Journal (Zhongzhou Xuekan), 2011, Issue 6.
- [15]The Book of Rites: Correct Interpretation (Liji Zhengyi), in Ruan Yuan's edited Thirteen Classics with Commentaries and Explanations (Shisan Jing Zhu Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1980, reprinted edition, p. 1251.
- [16]Xu Weiwei, Lu's Spring and Autumn: A Collection of Explanations (Lü Shi Chunqiu Jishi), Zhonghua Book Company, 2009, p. 284.
- [17]Ban Gu, Book of Han (Han Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 2500.
- [18]Ban Gu, Book of Han (Han Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 2608.
- [19]Liu Xie, The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons (Wenxin Diaolong), Zhonghua Book Company, 2000, p. 40.
- [20]Shen Yue, Book of Song (Song Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 759.
- [21]Su Yu, Spring and Autumn: Evidence of Meaning (Chunqiu Fanlu Yizheng), Zhonghua Book Company, 1992, p. 271.
- [22]Ban Gu, Book of Han (Han Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 2500.
- [23]Li Yanshou, History of the Northern Dynasties (Bei Shi), Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 369.
- [24]An Ju Xiangshan, Nakamura Shohachi, A Collection of Divination Texts (Weishu Jicheng), Hebei People's Publishing House, 1994, p. 998.
- [25]Liu Geng, Auspicious Signs (Ji Rui), in Wang Yunwu, Collection of Works from the First Compilation of Complete Books (Congshu Jicheng Chubian), Volume 702, Commercial Press, 1936, reprinted edition.
- [26]An Ju Xiangshan, Nakamura Shohachi, A Collection of Divination Texts (Weishu Jicheng), Hebei People's Publishing House, 1994, p. 510.
- [27]Qing Xitai, A History of Chinese Taoism (Zhongguo Daojiao Shi), Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1996, p. 30.
- [28]Yao Silian, Book of Liang (Liang Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1973, p. 742.
- [29]Wei Shou, Book of Wei (Wei Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 2954.
- [30]Hui Jiao, Biographies of Eminent Monks (Gaoseng Zhuan), Zhonghua Book Company, 1992, p. 76 – 77.
- [31]Hui Jiao, Biographies of Eminent Monks (Gaoseng Zhuan), Zhonghua Book Company, 1992, p. 315.
- [32]Wei Zheng, Linghu Defen, Book of the Sui (Sui Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1973, p. 1278.
- [33]Yuan Hong, Annals of the Later Han: Critical Edition (Hou Han Ji Kaoshu), Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, 1987, p. 60.

- [34]Shen Yue, Book of Song (Song Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 765.
- [35]Sima Qian, Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 1381 – 1382.
- [36]Sima Qian, Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 457 – 458.
- [37]Chen Shou, Records of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguozhi), Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 1135 – 1136.
- [38]An Ju Xiangshan, A Collection of Divination Texts (Weishu Jicheng), Hebei People's Publishing House, 1994, p. 419.
- [39]Zhou Zhenfu, The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons: Modern Translation (Wenxin Diaolong Jinyi), Zhonghua Book Company, 1986, p. 37.
- [40]Ban Gu, Book of Han (Han Shu), Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 2502 – 2503.