

A Comprehensive Review on the Evolution of the Image of Crows

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Abstract—The modern symbolic meaning of crows in Chinese culture differs considerably from the one in ancient times, which has been discussed in a number of papers. However, the image of crows didn't turn from the primeval divine bird to the present-day sign of ominousness in a simple way, especially over the long period from the far ancient times to the Han Dynasties, when the bird cast both good and ill impressions in people's minds. This paper aims to present a comprehensive review of the evolution of the image of crows in ancient China.

Keywords—image of crows; cultural progression; evolution

I. INTRODUCTION

People today generally treat crows as an ill omen, and they are often portrayed negatively in derogatory folk sayings and proverbs. As for the direct psychological feelings of the general public, it makes sense that crows are perceived as ominous. Crows are omnivorous with a preference for carcasses, whose carrion eating nature makes people associate them with death, which is also the main reason why crows are disliked. Besides, being omnivorous, crows are surely fond of grains, which is unforgivable to an agrarian people. Plus, the caw of crows is hated by most people.

However, as can be seen in ancient books, people in the past held intricate views towards the image of crows. Diverse views coexisted in the same period and the prevailing view changed constantly. At times, affection and aversion shared the same root. [1]

II. THE IMAGES OF CROWS BEFORE QIN DYNASTY

The pre-Qin period is in itself a concept spanning over a vast length of time, so it is divided into three sub-periods: mythological times (from antediluvian to the Yao Shun Yu period), semi-recorded history times (from the beginning of Xia Dynasty to Gonghe Regency) and recorded history times (post 841BC). [2]

Let's start from the mythological times.

An anthropologist named Sir Edward Tylor once said, "Where there is sunlight, there is sun worship." [3] The ancient Chinese people associated birds with the sun, so the setting of the sun and the rising of the moon was described as

"The golden crow descends in the west and the jade rabbit ascends in the east."

The earliest association between the sun and crows can be traced back to the ancient book *the Classic of Mountains and Seas — the Classic of the Great Wilderness: The East*: "There is a huge tree named Fusang over Tang Valley. When one sun proceeds there, another emerges, both of which are borne by a crow." [4] Guo Pu annotated, "There is a three-legged crow in each sun." Chu Xue Ji: Vol. 30 cited Chunqiu Yuan Ming Bao, "There is a three-legged golden crow in the sun. The golden crow is the essence of Yang. Yang numbers starts from one and develops into three; hence the crow in the sun has three legs." [5] This shows that our ancestors in the mythological times viewed crows as the incarnation of "the essence of Yang." This kind of association between the sun and birds demonstrates the "law of similarity" in primitive thinking:

Firstly, the sun travels in the heavens, resembling birds flying in the sky. The idea isn't unique to ancient China. Ra, the Ancient Egyptian sun god, is also a bird-headed man. Among the artifacts excavated from the Hemudu Culture ruins, there is also sculpture depicting double birds facing the sun. [6]

Secondly, as stated above, ancient people explained the movement of the sun as being borne by birds. The sun, as seen from the earth, is a circular object with no wings or tail, showing no wobbling during flight either. The flight of the sun was beyond ancient people's comprehension, so birds came to help, as can be seen in the pictures of sun-bearing birds on the painted pottery from Yangshao culture.

Thirdly, the movement of the sun is repetitive and cyclic, as seen in the rising-setting repetition and the seasonal cyclic change of solar zenith angle and the length of daytime. Birds' activities also occur in cycles: they leave nests in the morning, come back in the evening and migrate down south or up north according to season.

Those are the main reasons for the association between the sun and birds. Then how did the "generalized birds" turn into "specific crows"? It has been suggested that it had something to do with sunspots. There are sun patterns with a black spot in the middle on the pottery excavated in Xindian, which some researchers believe to be the proof of

observation of sunspot in the Bronze Age. (*Nature God and Nature Worship in China*, P168, He Xingliang.)

It is possible for the naked eye to see sunspots. The earliest record is found in the *Book of Han — Treatise on the Five Elements*: “The sun rose, yellow with black gas in the middle as big as cash.” I myself has also observed sunspots with the naked eye.

Therefore, crows in mythological times should have been worshipped as an idol of heliolatry. Yet, some other records make the situation complicated. Growing up, people all heard the story of Hou Yi shooting down the suns, in which the symbolic meaning of crows is not simply the divine birds to be worshipped, or rather the sun(s) is no longer so glorious.

“During Yao’s reign, ten suns emerged all at once, scorching crops and killing grass and trees, leaving people nothing to eat.” “Yao ordered Hou Yi to shoot at the suns. Hou Yi hit nine of them, killing the crows inside.” (*Huainanzi — Fundamental Norm*) “Hou Yi shot up at the ten suns and hit nine of them, killing all the crows in them and separating their wings. The one sun was left deliberately.” (*Annotations to Classic of Mountains and Seas*, Guo Pu.) [7]

Considering the factor of materialization of natural forces, it is probable that the legend of ten suns was related to a severe drought in the antediluvian times. Hou Yi shooting down nine suns was essentially that he led his tribe to fight against the drought successfully. Nine suns didn’t refer to the number nine specifically but multiple suns. Chances are that the origination of the myth had something to do with possible occurrence of parhelion. The mysteriousness of the phenomenon accumulated from mouth to mouth, finally becoming the “Hou Yi shooting down nine suns”, as it can be known today.

“Ten suns emerging all at once” shifted the sun’s role from beneficent to malignant, thus unfortunately turning crows into villains. Believing that crows were behind “ten suns emerging”, people treated crows as an ill omen, blaming them for the wrongs of the additional nine suns. So it can be seen that the negative image of crows took root in the times when they were divinized. Crows owed the contribution and attrition of their image to heliolatry, soaking in blame towards the sun as well as bathing in its glory, the sun being the key to their divinization and their undoing.

As civilization progressed on, this sort of understanding survived with the generation-to-generation passage of antediluvian mythology, gradually sedimenting into the foundation of the belief that crows are ominous.

Few materials are available from the semi-recorded history times. This is, on the one hand, due to the author’s (my own) limited ability in gathering materials, and on the other hand, due to the difficulty in determining whether the materials were actually recorded during the Xia and Shang period or they were fabricated by Han Dynasty Confucian scholars according to their memories. It is said that the totem of Xia was 熊 (bear) (or written as 能: a bear-like creature (*Guoyu* annotated by Wei Zhao); a deer-like creature (*Shuowen Jiezi*); a three-legged turtle-like creature (Erya:

Explaining Fish)). The creature’s relationship to the divine birds remains to be researched: “three-legged” is worth noticing; there may be some similarity between their color; it may have been a combination of totems.

It is clear that there existed ornitholatry in Shang Dynasty: “Under the edict of Heaven, Xuanniao descended and bore Shang people.” (*Classic of Poetry: Xuanniao*) “Jian Di swallowed the Xuanniao’s egg and gave birth to Xie.” (*Bamboo Annals*) (*Shenhua Xuanze Baiti*: P117. Yuan Ke) More detailed stories can be found in books written in the later ages, *Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals* and *Records of the Grand Historian: Basic Annals of Yin*. According to historians such as Fan Wenlan and Jian Bozan, Xuanniao (the swallow) was the totem of Shanghai Dynasty. Compared to the ambiguous creature “熊”, swallows have a much closer relationship to crows. A more academic explanation is that: in the process of mixing of different ethnic and tribal groups at that time, Yin-Shang tribes with the sun as their totem and Dong Yi tribes with birds as their totem gradually merged together. Their totems transformed constantly and finally took the form of a “three-legged crow”.

By Zhou Dynasty in the recorded-history times, crows regained their important role, as expressed in this pithy saying: Well bode the crow, up arose the Zhou. Dong Zhongshu, *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals: Vol. 13, Things of the Same Kind Stimulate Each Other*, cited *Shangshu Zhuan*, “Right before Zhou arose, large red crows, holding crop seeds in their mouths, gathered on the king’s palace. The king was pleased, so were all the ministers.” [9] “During the reign of King Wen, fire first emerged in the sky, and then red crows with red scrolls in their mouths gathered on the Altar of Soil.” (*Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals* and *Records of the Grand Historian: Vol.13, Ying Tong*) [10] “King Wu was crossing a river; halfway, a white fish jumped into the ship. King Wu picked it up and sacrificed it. After the crossing, fire flew down from the sky to the king’s palace and turned into crows, whose color was red and whose caw was cloud piercing, when eight hundred vassal lords gathered unexpectedly by the ferry, seeking alliance with Zhou. The lords all said, ‘King Zhōu of Shang can be attacked.’ King Wu replied, ‘Ye don’t know the Mandate of Heaven. It is not the time.’ Then he led the army back.” (*Records of the Grand Historian: Basic Annals of Zhou*) [11] “A red crow, holding a gui(圭) in his mouth, landed on the Altar of Zhou and said, ‘The Heaven commands you to attack and replace the Kingdom of Yin.’ The Diagram of Luo emerged from the river and the auspicious creature Chenghuang came out of the ground. King Wu was bestowed the standard of yellow crow.” (*Mozi*)

What were the “red crows”? Answer can be found in the Three Kingdoms period hundreds of years later. During the fierce Battle of Red Cliffs, the warriors of Eastern Wu in the rear, unaware of the result of the battle, were expecting eagerly. One dusk, General Cheng Pu got out of the encampment, when a murder of crows flew before the camp. In the crimson sunset, the crows turned red. General Cheng was thrilled, ordered the soldiers to prepare to celebrate the victory and informed Sun Quan. Seeing that his subordinates were confused, General Cheng explained, “Red crows bode

well; great victory is guaranteed.” Soon enough, and sure enough, the news of the triumph of Red Cliffs came. Today, the east-west main street of the city of Ruichang is still named Red Crow Avenue.

The originally black crows turned red in the crimson glow of the setting sun, hence the Giant Red Crows. The fact that the crows came from the east with the news of victory proved even more the association, held by our ancestors, between crows and the sun. Zhou Dynasty authorities bestowed the role of divine Mandate-of-Heaven-passing birds upon crows, to justify their new regime.

However, the image of crows in Zhou Dynasty was not onefold. There existed interpretations of it among the common people, different from the official one.

Common people’s opinions can be seen in folk songs and ballads. There is a line in the *Classic of Poetry: Odes of Bei: Beifeng*: “Nothing redder than the fox, nothing blacker than the crow.” A line in the *Classic of Poetry: Xiao Ya: Zhengyue*: “Every minister says he is the most clairvoyant, but who can tell the crow is male or female?” Crows are black, and it is difficult to tell their sex, which was used to deride King You of Zhou and his ministers. [12] As can be seen, the color of crows was used to mock the gloomy tyranny of the king, which tarnished the reputation of crows.

III. THE IMAGE OF CROWS DURING THE PERIOD OF QIN, HAN, WEI AND JIN DYNASTIES

From the Warring States period through the Wei and Jin period, Chenwei doctrines (doctrines of divination combined with mystical interpretation of Confucian beliefs) burgeoned and flourished, one of which was called “Wu De Shi Zhong Shuo” (the theory of the endless cycles of the Five Virtues). This doctrine analogized everything in the world to Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth, and then applied the generating and overcoming interactions in Wu Xing theory to explicate phenomena, elucidate relationships and illuminate the future. Zou Yan from the School of Yin-yang, among the Hundred Schools of Thought, was proficient at this doctrine. Dong Zhongshu in West Han Dynasty tried to deconstruct Confucian doctrines by means of the theoretical model of Wu De Shi Zhong Shuo. The military advisors in the Three Kingdoms period often adopted this doctrine to analyze the circumstances and trend of the contemporary world. During Wei and Jin Dynasties, “pure conversation” about xuanxue (mysterious learning) prevailed, even so did Chenwei doctrines.

The State of Qin unified China by means of the School of Law. However, after establishing a unified dynasty, Qin needed to find an evidence to prove that its rule was in accordance with the Mandate of Heaven. As stated above, the flourishing of Zhou Dynasty was accompanied by phenomena related to “the Fortune of Fire”, such as “large red crows”, “fire emerging in the sky” and “red crows with red scrolls in their mouths”. Zhou defeated Shang. Shang conformed to the Virtue of Water, so Zhou should have conformed to the Virtue of Earth (Earth overcomes Water) and enjoyed the Fortune of Earth. “Fire generates Earth” explains why Zhou worshipped the sun (the biggest fire)-

symbolizing divine crows. Qin unified China by annexing all the vassal states of Zhou and thus annihilated it. According to “Wu De Shi Zhong Shuo”, the Fortune of Metal is capable of superseding the Fortune of Earth (Metal overcomes Earth). Therefore, Qin proclaimed itself to be a dynasty that emerged out of the Fortune of Metal and complied with the Laws of Heaven. For example, the cardinal direction West belongs to Metal and Qin lay to the west of the other six states. Metal dominates cold and killing, which happened to justify the massacres Qin committed during wars and its harsh laws. Metal generates Water and Water is back in the Five Colors, so Qin Dynasty favored the color black, which was also the main color of its imperial dressing. Consequently, the “the Virtue of Fire”-classified crows didn’t enjoy high status.

By Han Dynasty, “Wu De Shi Zhong Shuo” continued to be employed by the authorities, and, through the efforts of Dong Zhongshu, integrated with Confucianism. Liu Bang, the Gaozu (high ancestor) of Han, subdued Qin and annihilated Chu, which was interpreted as “Fire overcame Metal”. Hence came the fabricated legend that Liu Bang, as the Red Emperor, slew the White Serpent and arose. Metal dominates cold and killing while Fire dominates generating and developing, which can explain the economic rehabilitation policy at the beginning of Han Dynasty. Against the background of illustrating politics with Wu Xing theories, crows, as the symbol of the Virtue of Fire, got worshipped again.

Examples can be seen as follows. The three-legged crow (blue bird) of the Queen Mother of the West delivered a letter to Emperor Wu of Han, informing him the advent of the Queen Mother. Crows became good-news-bearing divine messengers. Another example of crows representing the authorities in Han Dynasty is that they were used to describe certain posts in the government: Yu Shi Tai (the Censorate / the Terrace of Imperial Censors) was called Wu Tai (the Terrace of Crows) and Yu Shi Fu (the censors’ office compound) was called Wu Fu (the crows’ office compound). *The Book of Han: Vol.83, Xue Xuan and Zhu Bo*: At that time, the wells in the censors’ office compound all dried up. There were rows of cypress trees in the compound. Thousands of wild crows often perched on the trees, coming at dusk and leaving at dawn, and were thus called “dawn-dusk crows.” [13] *Lunheng: Chapter 9, Jiyan pian* also records, “One king of Wusun people was called Kunmo, whose father was killed by Xiongnu right before he was born. He was abandoned in the wilderness, but crows brought meat and fed him.” [14]

Han Dynasty advocated its rule through filial piety, so the filial bird reputation of crows contributed to their good image. A tale had it that crows could feed their mothers, so they were also called filial birds. *Commentary on the Water Classic: Vol. 40* cited *Yi Yuan* by Liu Jingshu of Southern Song, “There once lived a man name Yan Wu in Dongyang, well-known for his filial piety. One day he was burying his late father, when a murder of crows, led by the one he once saved, came to help him pile up the tomb mound with their mouths. They worked so hard that they hurt their mouths. Dongyang was thus renamed Wushang (crows’ injury), and

later renamed Wuxiao (crows' filiality) by Wang Mang to commend their behavior." [15] The rulers promoted the virtues in animals and attributed the good deeds of feeding parents to birds, expecting to achieve the governing objective of "managing the common populace; emphasizing the moral relations".

Of course, the image of crows during Han Dynasty was not onefold, either. It was written in *Jiaoshi Yilin* by Jiao Yanshou of Western Han Dynasty that "There was a crow named Baijia (home undermining), who convened poisonous birds and infested the land. ... crows caw, skyfire falls, burning my houses and imperiling my consorts. ... crows fly and foxes scream, national insurrections never cease. Weak above and strong below, to be punished by Yin (阴)." [16] So it can be seen that in Han Dynasty, it was believed that the appearance of "Wu (crows) portended the coming of natural disasters.

He Yan of the Three Kingdoms period was sent to prison for some reason. Two crows came and perched on his house. He Yan's daughter said, "Crows caw pleasantly. My father is to be exonerated." Soon enough, and sure enough, He Yan was acquitted. (*Anthology of Yuefu Poetry: Lyrics for Qin Music* cited *Discourse on Qin* by Li Mian) [17] The theophany of the divine crows in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* testifies to the divine image of crows. It was recorded in *Jiao Fang Ji* that "Liu Yikang, the king of Pengcheng of Liu Song Dynasty, and Liu Yiji, the king of Hengyang, were incarcerated in Xunyang but were pardoned later. The messenger with the amnesty edict didn't arrive yet, but Yiji's family had come to the prison and reported the good news, 'Crows caw last night. There will be an amnesty from the authorities.' Moments later, the messenger arrived. This was recorded in *Wu Ye Ti*, lyrics of Yuefu." [18]

In the eyes of clerics during the Wei and Jin period, crows were bestowed upon more abundant significance. "The connotations of the crows' image in the *Classic of Poetry* and *Chu Ci* (*Songs of Chu*) evolved into the original model of crows' worldly image in Chinese poetics. The model was further broadened and extended in the development of Chinese poetry. In addition to integrating with images of desolate suburbs, battlefields and lonely temples to produce an environment of bleakness and barrenness, it also blended with the image of gloaming to convey lonesome scenes, such as longing for home or beloved ones at dusk and traveling the world all alone. It was also used in the poems of Cao Cao, Cao Zhi and Cao Pi, and crows were likened to talents, which showed the diversity of the image of crows during the period."

IV. THE DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE OF THE IMAGE OF CROWS IN LATER TIMES

During the Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties period, the cultural symbolic meaning of crows stayed, for the most part, auspicious as the previous times. The poets in Tang Dynasty often adopted the allusions and images developed by their predecessors, so such usages were common as "crows referring to the sun", "crows being the symbol of imperial

prosperity", "displaying filial piety through crows" and "crows' caws boding well".

Moon rabbit and sun crow walks and flies separate ways; like lightening vicissitudes of lifefade away. (*Complete Tang Poems: Vol. 24, Shang Ge Xing* by Lu Nanjie)

Strive for the sun crow to shine over the north side of the mountain; release the blue sky to enlighten my mind. (*Complete Tang Poems: Vol. 883, Lushan Pubu* by Zhang Bi)

East wind whispers across land of waters; Golden Crow casts warm shadows over the north side of south mountain. (*Complete Tang Poems: Vol. 785, Chun* by an anonymous author)

Gloomy islands stretch afar, dividing wild geese in Dongguo; sunny buildings stand tall, attracting the sun crow. (*Complete Tang Poems: Vol. 823, Song Xiping Guren* by Huai Chu)

Mount Xiang stands slanting, mist washing green trees; the sun rises east, out flying the divine crow. (*Complete Tang Poems: Vol. 575, Jiang Hou Shen Ge* by Wen Tingyun)

However, the notion that "crows are evil" still existed, and the divine status of crows showed a gradually declining trend in poetry. In the various poems titled *Wu Ye Ti* (crows caw at night), crows were used to portray dismal and desolate scenes. [20]

It was recorded in the preface of an old Tibetan Dunhuang manuscript, P.T.1045 "Crow Divination", that "Crows are the Gonpo (Tibetan for protector) of human beings, delivering divine edicts from deities ... She soars in the sky, delivering edicts from gods ...". The citation reveals that ancient Tibetan people worshipped crows as the messengers of gods.

By the Songs period, the notion that crows bode evil gradually became the mainstream.

Rong Zhai Man Bi: Vol. 3 by Hong Mai of Southern Song, "Northerners consider crows' caw auspicious and magpies' call ominous. Southerners delighted in the call of magpies, but when hearing the caw of crows, they spit and chase them, so much so that they even shoot at them with crossbows and slingshots to drive them away. As for the reason, people of Song Dynasties themselves had different explanations.

"People today delight in the call of magpies, but spit at the sound of crows' caw. The reason is that crows caw at the sight of something strange and people want to spit away strange evil things." (*Pi Ya: Vol 6* by Lu Tian of Northern Song)

Northerners like crows' caw but hate magpies' call, while southerners like magpies' call but hate crows' caw. Whether crows' caw bodes well or evil varies, while magpies' call bodes well for the most part. (*Moke Hui Xi: Vol. 2* by Peng Cheng of Northern Song) Crows are intelligent enough to understand disasters, so people are afraid of their presence. (*Erya Yi: Vol 13* by Luo Yuan of Song Dynasty)

“Ah, cawing crows, you get cursed and spat on around town. Ah, crows, you know bad things will happen and try to inform people loyally, but people blame you for the evil. You are not the source of evil and how can you be? The evil get you into trouble. People think you are evil because you inform them, but if you don’t, can the evil go away? You informed them beforehand, but you get blamed on. Why don’t you just caw at times like Fenghuang? Then people won’t blame and be afraid of you.” (*Ode to Ling Wu* by Mei Yaochen of Song Dynasty)

We know from the above that northerners like crows while southerners hate them; the main reason is that northerners, for the most part, inherited the mainstream view of the previous dynasties, but as the court of Song Dynasty moved south, the economic and political centers shifted south too. The ideas about crows in southern culture turned mainstream, so did viewing crows as ominous birds in their cultural symbolic meaning. In fact, the contemporary nomadic dynasties in the north didn’t have much taboo against crows, which may have had something to do with the difference between northern and southern modes of production.

For instance, the tale of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl originated in the north and spread to the south gradually. In the process, the murder of crows that form the bridge turned into a flock of magpies. Proof can be found in the following two verses: Why forget to thank the crows (for forming the bridge) and only favor the spiders and ask them for gossamer? (*Xin Wei Qixi* by Li Shangyin of Tang Dynasty) Magpies mistold them the dating date; Cowherd and Weaver Girl are still heart-broken Xianren (immortals). (*Zhe Gu Tian: Qixi* by Yan Yidao of Song Dynasty)

People in Song Dynasties believed crows could foretell both good and evil, but more often than not, the results were ominous, so crows got more and more disliked. In time, it came to be believed that the appearance of crows portended the advent of disasters. Acted upon by the various psychological reasons stated above, the unlucky image of crows finally took shape and even further developed into folk taboo in some places.

The influence of Song people’s belief extended till today, except in Qing Dynasty. Legend had it that Nurhaci’s life was once endangered during a battle against Ming Dynasty’s army, when a murder of crows flew to his side and covered him, saving his life. The same thing happened to Dorgon. Later, crows became the guardian deity of the Imperial House of Qing. The original record is in *Jilin Hui Zheng*, “When they make an offering to their poles, Manchu people feed crows with meat, which is probably because their ancestor named Fancha fled and hid in the wilderness, almost caught by his pursuers, and then a divine crow happened to land on his head. Seeing the crow’s perch at a distance, the pursuers thought it was deadwood and turned back halfway. Fancha thus survived and then hid his identity all his life. From then on, his descendants were grateful to crows and exhorted each other not to hurt them. These poles named “Suo La Gan” were probably used by their ancestors to break through bushes and fend off fierce animals when

digging ginseng in the mountains. There is a round bowl on the top of the pole. The pole is stuck into the ground, and the bowl filled with food. Crows will come and eat.” Therefore, the original purpose of the divine pole was not to offer sacrifices to the Heaven, but to feed crows, as a memorial service for their totem ancestors.

V. CONCLUSION

The evolution of the symbolic meaning of crows is indeed complicated, not demonstrating the linear pattern from divine birds to “funereal birds.” During the evolutionary process of their image, mainstream and folk views coexisted with notable regional differences, which is true not only in China but also in many other countries around the world. This is enough to prove that politics and regional differences have a fairly obvious influence on culture. Nevertheless, our stand should be clear that no matter what symbolic meaning our ancestors have bestowed upon crows, it is necessary judge crows fairly by scientific standards. As for the prevalent notion of “crows feeding their parents”, it has always been a way used by Confucianists to civilize people about “Xiao (filiality)” and “Li (the proprieties)” by means of wild animal images, but whether crows do have this kind of habit remains to be verified by modern observation and research.

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