

Birds in Art and Culture Series:

The Use of Birds in the Civil Service of Ancient China & Other Nations

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Note: Much of this article was first written for and appeared in the Bird Ecology Study Group website in October 2011. Link: <https://besgroup.org/2012/10/25/the-use-of-birds-in-the-civil-service-of-ancient-china/>. I have updated the article and references.

Introduction

During a trip to China, I was impressed by the frequent use of birds in the history of China. The classical example is the cloisonné enamel (porcelain/ceramic pottery) crane figurines that adorn the throne of the emperor in the Forbidden City (Plate 1). The crane symbolises longevity (the long neck representing a long lifespan) and auspiciousness which the emperor valued. The Crane also represents a soaring spirit, health and happiness. There are many references to birds in ancient drawings and artwork and contemporary artists continue to mimic these ancient craftsmen.



Plate 1: Red-crowned Crane adorning the Emperor's throne at the Forbidden City (left) and a cloisonné enamel bowl with bird images.

One day, while having lunch (a Peking duck!), our excellent guide Peter Bo, knowing my interest in birds, was kind enough to point out and explain the historical use of birds on the uniforms of civil servants. Birds were used as a 'ranking of seniority' system and this was elaborately displayed on the walls of the restaurant we were at, allowing me to get some images.

Historical Background on the use of Rank Badges in the Chinese Civil Service

Rank badges have been worn in China since before the 14th century, initially worn by the emperor and then extended to the royal family and officers of the court. The emperor wore a five-clawed dragon and the empress a phoenix (Plate 2), both mythical creatures symbolising strength, beauty and divine rule. From the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the emperor awarded

badges with creatures to court officials as signs of imperial favour. This was continued in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), where there was further standardisation and increased bureaucracy with rigorous examinations introduced into the civil service. Birds then came to be used to denote various civil ranks, and predatory animals the military ranks. Rank badges continued to be used until the end of imperial rule.

The use of a "bird ranking system" is an imaginative and artistic scheme, better than the "pips" or "stars" given to today's officers. It showed the value placed on animals and the connection that people had with nature.



Plate 2: Phoenix-Dragon Motif in Empress Chambers at Forbidden City.

Design and Location of Rank Badges

The rank badges underwent some changes over time. Initially woven into the chest and back of silk robes during the Ming dynasty (Plate 3), they became small squares sewn on to the court robe in the Qing dynasty. By the mid-1700s, the emperor ruled that officials wear a dark, front-opening surcoat called 'bùfú' ('robe with a patch'). The drawing of the bird was placed on the breast plate and the back of the uniform. The front badge is divided into two pieces and sewed to the two sides of the front to accommodate the opening of the surcoat.



Plate 3: Unknown author, Ming Dynasty portrait of Chinese official Jiang Shunfu (1453–1504). The rank badge on his chest shows cranes indicating he was a civil official of the first rank. Original Image © Nanjing Museum. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Choice of Bird for Rank Badges in the Chinese Civil Service

There were nine civil ranks (an important number in Chinese culture), each represented by a different bird. I suspect that the choice of the bird to determine rank was heavily influenced by the cultural outlook of the time. See images and description in the table below. Images were taken with my long lens in a dark restaurant and I avoided flash so as not to disturb the other customers. This made images difficult to capture as I was too near. Flash would not be useful due to glass covering the cloth plates. The rendering here is also not the original for the Qing dynasty period and some artistic liberty must be given. The restaurant also had the order of the birds mixed up. Hence I had to do quite some research to identify the bird from the artwork and may have got it wrong. I value opinions if I have made a mistaken identity. Internet searches for the original rank badges (on sale as antiques) also show much variation and difficulty in bird identification.

In addition to artistic variation, problems with bird identification also result from attempts to 'fool' the common person by disguising a rank badge of a lower rank as that of a higher one. One common example is to make a 9th ranking Paradise Flycatcher look like a 5th rank Silver Pheasant. There were always enough identification marks to the discerning individual to see the real status.

There were 9 ranks based on the value placed on the bird. The lowest rank was a Paradise Flycatcher and the highest rank was, not unexpectedly, the Crane. In between, from lowest to highest, were the Quail, Duck, Egret, Pheasant, Goose, Peacock and Pheasant.

Image	Bird	Rank	Meaning
	Red-crowned Crane <i>Grus japonensis</i> also known as the Manchurian Crane.	1	Longevity Wisdom
	Golden Pheasant <i>Chrysolophus pictus</i> also known as the Chinese Pheasant.	2	Courage
	Peacock. Green Peafowl <i>Pavo muticus</i> .	3	Beauty Protection Holiness



Image	Bird	Rank	Meaning
	Wild Goose. Uncertain about species as images come in white, shades of grey and brown. There are at least 12 geese in China. Could be the Swan Goose <i>Anser cygnoides</i>.	4	Loyalty
	Silver Pheasant <i>Lophura nycthemera</i>.	5	Beauty Good fortune
	Egret. Colours vary from white to grey in various images, so either the Little Egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i>, Medium Egret <i>Ardea intermedia</i> or Pacific Reef-Heron <i>Egretta sacra</i>.	6	Happiness
	Mandarin Duck <i>Aix galericulata</i>.	7	Loyalty

Image	Bird	Rank	Meaning
 © Amar-Singh HSS	Quail. Unsure which one, possibly the Japanese Quail <i>Coturnix japonica</i> .	8	Courage
 © Amar-Singh HSS	Paradise Flycatcher. Possibly the Amur Paradise-Flycatcher <i>Terpsiphone incei</i> .	9	Longevity Good fortune

Impact of Rank Badges on Other Countries

The Chinese bird rank badges influenced neighbouring countries and trade partners. This included Hong Kong, Korea, Vietnam, Tibet and even Malaysia. To some they were pretty robes and gifts, but to others (e.g. Vietnam) they copied not just the robes but the entire system behind it. In historical Malaya, the Kapitan Cina (heads of the Chinese community) followed the Qing officials in dress and lifestyle. It is hard to find images, but here is an example of Kapitan China Chung Keng Kwee (1827-1901), the leader of the Hakka-speaking Hai San society in Malaya (Plate 4).

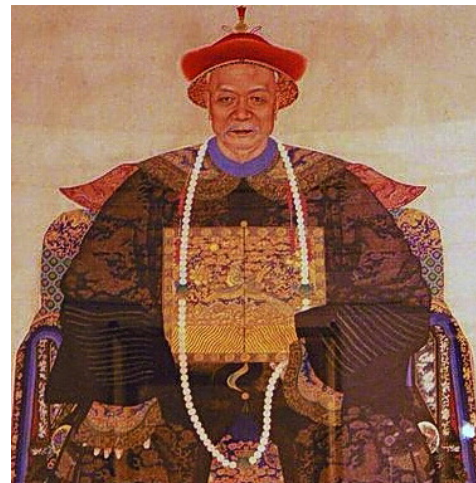


Plate 4: Original Image © Pinang Peranakan Mansion, Penang, Malaysia.
(also known as the Baba Nyonya Museum & the Kapitan Chung Keng Kwee Museum)

Use of Rank Badges in the Chinese Military Service

It is also meaningful to note that animals were used to denote ranks in the military service. Here they used nine animals, mainly predatory, starting with the Sea Horse (horse that travels over waves) and moving up in rank progressively to the Rhinoceros (2 levels), Panther, Bear, Tiger, Leopard, Lion and ending with the Qilin (mythical hooved Chinese chimerical creature).

Conclusion

The use of birds and other animals in the daily life of the civil and military service may have marked a healthy respect for animals at the time. It could also indicate that society valued

certain attributes in animals, be it beauty, strength or agility. In our time, in the magnificent city of Beijing, we noted that many of the locals appreciated their parks and nature. As we become more environmentally conscious and bird watching grows, I hope for a resurgence in the value of birds in many cultures.

Acknowledgment

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Useful References

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